

# THE TREND OF MODERN POETRY

BY  
GEOFFREY BULLOUGH

“ What are all those fish that he gasping  
on the strand? ” W B YEATS

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TO  
MY WIFE

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

MUCH has recently been written on modern poetry, yet many readers and teachers still feel the need of a brief summary of general tendencies and individual achievements which would cover the last fifty years and show how contemporary poetry emerged from earlier English and French movements. That I have adequately supplied this lack I cannot hope. Many problems which I could not touch without giving them many pages had to be ignored, and I am aware of the scanty treatment here given to some very interesting talents. But I shall be happy if I have avoided the error of those critics who, immersed in biographical and bibliographical detail, have been unable to see wood for trees, and the kindred error of those who, strong in current æsthetic dogmas, have seen the living wood only in one exotic kind of tree. The historical and the interpretative methods of criticism are both out of fashion, yet never were they more needed than in this time of jarring sects and petty dictators. If some of my own judgments seem arbitrarily asserted, I believe that I could substantiate them at greater length. I have written as simply as possible, but assume some general knowledge of literature and of contemporary social and intellectual conditions.

But for the encouragement of the editor of *The Scotsman*, Mr G. A. Waters, who published some

preliminary articles, this book would not have been begun I wish to thank him for his courtesy Only two or three paragraphs of those articles remain here I wish also to thank Mr Ross D Waller for reading proofs and making some salutary suggestions

GEOFFREY BULLOUGH

THE UNIVERSITY  
SHEFFIELD, *November* 1934

### PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

FOR the second edition of this book in 1941 a few corrections and additions were made , for this third edition, which brings the story down to about the end of the recent war, much more alteration was necessary Many older poets are still writing well, and notice has been taken of some recent work, for instance in Chapter Three I have paid tardy tribute to Mr Edmund Blunden, whose poetry one grows into with years that bring the philosophic mind , and I have shown the “ Georgian ” tradition continuing in the 'forties Many young writers, unknown when the book was first written, have developed during the last ten years in ways now possible to compare and synthesise Hence Chapter Eight has been greatly enlarged, and the last two chapters are almost entirely new

My intention has been, not to mention every modern poet (though some may think I have noticed too many), but to choose the most symptomatic and the most promising and to group them as understandingly as possible. My scheme is very broad and largely based on the poets' declarations, but the good poet defies all categories, even his own.

GEOFFREY BULLOUGH

KING'S COLLEGE  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE INHERITANCE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

POETRY is at once the poet's reaction to the world without, and the verbal harmony imposed upon it by his imagination Changes in poetic technique are due not merely to individual genius in contact with a resistant medium, but also to changes in the social and intellectual environment If Romanticism sprang from an imaginative revolution by which the worship of Man and Nature was related to the growth of industrial democracy, its continuance through the nineteenth century was made possible by a compromise with the growing sense of an essential opposition between the human spirit and its environment Only a superficial criticism could regard Victorian literature as self-complacent and certain of individual and social perfectibility In the work of Tennyson, Browning (even), Swinburne, Arnold, Meredith, we can trace the fear that nature might be unfriendly, that man might not be a free agent, that immortality and progress might be illusory, that the accounts of life might reveal a balance of suffering over happiness Their imaginations might refuse in the last resort to dwell in such a world, but the process of what Mr I A Richards has called||“ the Neutralization of Nature ” went on, “ the transference from the Magical view of the

world to the scientific," the gradual decline of "belief in a world of Spirits and Powers which control events, and which can be invoked, and to some extent controlled themselves, by human practice."

That this transference is now complete, desirable, or essential for the well-being of poetry, consideration of much contemporary work will show to be untrue. The "Georgians" are not to be lightly dismissed merely because of their indulgence in the pathetic fallacy. Nevertheless, scientific rationalism and other factors plain enough to anybody acquainted with nineteenth-century thought have gone far to lessen the sense of any *immediacy* of contact between man and the spiritual world through physical phenomena. It is as difficult for us as for Pope to rise through the contemplation of hedgerows into direct communion with "something far more deeply interfused." Astronomical researches, as startling as those of the Renaissance, have widened the physical, but, for the time being, narrowed the spiritual universe. Biology, anthropology, psychology, economic and social struggles, have weakened our faith in the instruments of body and mind. We are organisms ill-adapted to an alien world, unsure of heaven and of our own natures, yet faced with the problem of survival and growth as intelligent civilised beings in an age when our vast new knowledge is used for purely material and even bestial ends, and when the social order is being transformed by economic pressure and inward desire.

The poetry which reflects the diverse reactions of poets to this situation is no creature of sudden emergence Twentieth-century technique and poetic ideas can be appreciated fully only by reference to late-Victorian poetry To sketch this background must therefore be our first concern

Against the limited optimism of the earlier Victorians we may set the pessimism of James Thomson, Thomas Hardy, and A E Housman One of Bradlaugh's militant atheists, Thomson was no mere poet of gloom, *Sunday at Hampstead* and *Sunday up the River* treated Cockney love with boisterous sympathy, he anticipated Mr Kipling in bringing into poetry the urban lower classes and their colloquialisms To mingle the ordinary with fantasy was frequently his aim, he succeeded in this, however, only in *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) Here his revolt against the pain of life transmutes actual London existence into a limbo of despair Common sights, lamplit streets, street orators, the river, are etherialised by this inverted Shelley into symbols of spiritual solitude in a godless universe Thomson came to see the external world as a dreamlike projection of his own nihilism Certain of his moods were paralleled in Thomas Hardy, whose dramatic lyrics and narratives carried on into the twentieth century the mid-Victorian sceptical humanitarianism.

Denying Christianity and immortality, Hardy contemplated the sum of human suffering, speculating bitterly as to the nature of its Maker in such poems as *Nature's Questioning*, *By the Earth's Corpse*,

*Doom and She* Was God a bungler, or apathetic ? Comparing, like Vaughan, the steadfastness of mute insensate things with man's agonies, he illustrated in many of his best poems his apprehension that man's powers of feeling and thought brought with them a unique capacity for suffering in a world of inscrutable laws

From Browning he learned his dramatic technique and the use of everyday idiom<sup>1</sup>; but he lacked Browning's sensuousness and love of the distant past. For him the Wessex of the past century was enough, and the significant force of stark expression<sup>2</sup>. Looking on man as a dreamer shocked by actualities, he portrayed instances of thwarting, especially in love. But the *sæva indignatio* of his irony<sup>3</sup> was softened by sympathy with the victim, and since he was something other than G K Chesterton's "village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot," he reflected life's joyous moments in such poems as *Lyonesse*, *The Market Girl*, *A Thunder-storm in Town*, *Timing Her*. But most of his work was a protest ; if his intellect accepted the new world of Schopenhauer, the Darwinians, and the Biblical critics, his heart rebelled against the "vast Imbecility," and his hope of "evolutionary meliorism" remained theoretic, as the choruses of *The Dynasts* make clear. That vast epic-drama required a power of architectural planning which redeems the often prosaic severity of Hardy's verse, setting the course of the Napoleonic wars in a universal perspective, and revealing the insignificance as well as the nobility of men—through

dialogue, action, and the comments of supernatural powers

The ruggedness, grotesquerie, and occasional banality of Hardy's poetry were the fruits of an unresolved tension between the imaginative ideal and the actual<sup>1</sup> The poetry of A. E. Housman derived its simplicity of phrase and movement from an achieved acceptance Rarely does he cry out against "The laws of God, the laws of man" *The Shropshire Lad* (1896), *Last Poems* (1922), and *More Poems* (1936) are a small output, yet he was influential, stimulating love of locality and economy of utterance in the Georgians and others The stoicism developed by classical studies he made poignant and faintly dramatic by writing as a Shropshire farmer, a soldier, or a criminal of the old hanging days To the countryman's fatalism he added the scholar's reticence and compression of thought Never a word too much mars the restraint of his ballad-stanzas, whose variations of pattern move within the narrowest limits Housman used the pastoral, like Marvell, for meditation on the ephemerality and dissatisfactions of life His rustics lack the natural substance of Hardy's; his irony is thin but piercing; his epigrams have often a gnomic inevitability Like Gray, he "never spoke out"

Melancholy in these three poets accompanied the steadfast contemplation of a universe robbed of its ultimate meaning The reaction of the so-called "Decadent" school took another form Here scepticism, narrowing reality into the flux of sensations and thoughts within the individual mind, led to a

discarding of absolute standards in morality, religion and art Pater's *Conclusion* to *The Renaissance*, which became the breviary of the æsthetes, seemed to preach a hedonism actually far from the writer's character "While all melts under our feet we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses " With the examples of Baudelaire, Huysmans and Swinburne in mind, Wilde and his followers made their studies in strange vices and strange souls, desiring as much to shock the Philistine as to express their own perversity From Gautier they took the trust in sensation which gave to their best work a remarkable hardness of outline , from Gautier and Flaubert the doctrine of Art for Art's sake, which led to Wilde's "All art is entirely useless," and a deliberate self-limitation in the pursuit of perfect expression Such an ascetic ideal was an antidote to the facility of Browning and Swinburne, but often declined into preciosity, while the conscious separation of art from the rest of life resulted in an intense impressionism, narrow in range and imagery Yet the Decadents wrote under the influence of Baudelaire, the Goncourts, and Flaubert as well as of *Emaux et Camées* Their sordid settings and motifs (though often melodramatically drawn) restored to poetry themes neglected since Crabbe, and prepared for the more balanced use of dark scenes and passions in later poetry, while their translations and imitations of French writers crude and uncomprehending

though they frequently were, broke down the barriers of insularity, and made possible the interest in other cultures which is one of the most important features of English literature to-day

The two most significant Decadent poets were Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons. Dowson envied the melodic skill of Poe and Verlaine "A song for him was music first, and then whatever you please, afterwards, so long as it suggested, never told, some deliberate sentiment, a sigh, a caress" (A. Symons). Such an exquisite attitude brought exhalation of feeling, if considerable metrical subtlety. The famous poem to Cynara was an accomplished piece of boyish febrility. But in his translations from Verlaine, in *Vita summa brevis*, *Venite Descendamus*, *Epigram*, and one or two Villanelles, Dowson achieved a Latin elegance and reticence.

Symons had not so miniature nor so perfect a talent (Compare *To One in Alienation, II*, with Dowson's *Cynara*). *Days and Nights*, dedicated to Pater and owing much to Rossetti, contained excellent naturalistic 'impressions' and portraits of strange types, an opium eater, a nun, a street singer, a flagellant. In *London Nights* (1895) the influence of Verlaine, of Impressionist painting, increased, hence such colour-studies as *Grey and Green* (*to Walter Sickert*), and the Degas-like seizure of moments of stage-life (*Décor de Théâtre*). It is inherent in such poetry that it "dates," that it catches the moment of its inspiration. Symons' studies in erotic passion lacked the intellectual sophistry of Baudelaire, "The modern malady

of love is nerves," he wrote He excelled in the suggestion of mood or personality by external description, as in the *Bianca* poems His later work, influenced by Yeats and the Elizabethans, had great evocative power, e.g. *Airs for the Lute*, *To a Gitana Dancing*, *Roman Elegies*, *Why Write in Images like Donne, Montserrat* His critical writings introduced the French Symbolists to English readers, and fostered influences to be touched on later For the moment it is enough to recall Verlaine's demands /" Pas la couleur, rien que la nuance," and "la chanson grise, où l'Indécis au Précis se joint "/ Symons attained these less successfully than Dowson, who was also "De la musique encore et toujours" But the work of both is significant of the awakening of English poetry to foreign influences They were at the same time Decadents and forerunners of a new phase

The "self-entanglement" of such poets could not satisfy men of more vigorous temper The sordidness of cities which fascinated the Decadents sent the imagination of others flying out to unspoiled country at home or overseas, while patriotism combined with a revulsion against introspection to produce a poetry of the open air, of the joy of life, in Stevenson, Henley, Kipling, Newbolt, Doughty, Scawen Blunt, and even John Davidson

Stevenson's careful craftsmanship was influenced by the "aesthetic" movement, but the title of his *Underwoods* (1887) was a more than verbal homage to Ben Jonson He bequeathed his graceful succinctness to the Georgians *A Child's Garden of*

*Verses* (1885) is a necessary link between Blake, Christina Rossetti and Mr De la Mare, for Stevenson had an insight into the simpler moods of children lacking in his predecessors. But his influence consisted chiefly in the popularisation of a boisterous delight in the open air, the fellowship of moors and roads.

His friend Henley praised the "generous gods" for giving "Unto all the joy of life," and with greater robustiousness proclaimed himself the master of his fate, a noble gesture for a sick man. The charm of his open-air songs was, however, reduced by a blustering tone. His most valuable work lay in the impressionistic pieces that revealed him groping towards a new technique.

Little poetic feeling suffused the bald descriptions of *In Hospital*. Yet Henley saw that the stream of impressions evoked by the most commonplace surroundings might be food for poetry, though he himself mistook journalistic jottings for imagination. *Vigil* has all the raw material except the one essential—significant emotion.

Far in the stillness a cat  
Languishes loudly A cinder  
Falls, and the shadows  
Lurch to the leap of the flame The next man to me  
Turns with a moan

Without this sort of thing we should not have had Mr Eliot's *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, which organises similar material into a veritable mood of anguish.

Henley dedicated a poem to Whistler, and the influence of the Impressionists is apparent in the

*London Voluntaries* Here his love of the manifold life of the city and his appreciation of effects of light give each poem a unity His best work is pictorial, capturing the fugitive tricks of air which transform sordidness to beauty For the rest, he assisted in the freeing of verse from formal shackles, by his experiments in rhymeless lines, some in quatrains of *Hiawatha* trochees, some in irregular dactylic measures, one at least, *The Song of the Sword*, in two-beat dactyls freely used to suggest the Old English accentual rhythms, with occasional alliteration

In Rudyard Kipling personal braggadocio was absent, his passion for Sussex set a lasting fashion in local pride and was related to a love of the English historical tradition which expanded into a worship of the idea of Empire Blatant such patriotism might become, and strident under stress, but it was no ignoble product of its time The implications of *Recessional* and *Song of the English* were ludicrously narrow, but not hypocritical Their far-flung insularity was merely a background to the more successful poems in which Kipling portrayed incidents in the imperial process as seen by humble servants of the Imperialist Idea

The unstable marching rhythms of his lays were perfectly adapted to their matter—the presentation of soldier- or sailor-morality in the vernacular Similarly the crudity of *Gunga Din*, *Fuzzy Wuzzy*, or *Danny Deever* was quite in character, though we are repelled to find a similar attitude in poems written ostensibly in the poet's own person In

truly dramatic narrative he "embalmed" a section of Victorian society left untouched by novelists. He proved the poetic force of plebeian idiom at a time when diction was in danger of etiolation. His rawness and vulgarity were salutary. He rescued the ballad from its Pre-Raphaelite decorators and made literature of the music-hall song and the chantey, concealing considerable control of rhythm in careless measures. He appealed to jaded minds by primitive tales of romance in the actual world, of struggles with the elements. Ruskin had attacked the machine, Alice Meynell was to see in it the mind as well as the body of Hercules, Kipling was the first to perceive its aesthetic qualities and to vindicate the use in verse of its technical terminology.

His follower Sir Henry Newbolt's verse is Kipling in evening dress. Here the marching rhythms are subtilised by the public school spirit, but the mentality is simpler than that of Kipling's Tommies because it is not preoccupied with labour or army law, but regards history as a boyish pageant of gallantry and courtesy. More at home on the sea, and capable, as in *Homeward Bound*, of a deliberate grace, he lacked Kipling's power as well as his harshness, the world becomes the fantasy of an English gentleman.

John Davidson linked many current tendencies, scepticism, patriotism, local pride, impressionism, with a new mood of revolt. In *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893), though he regretted the evil cast by man's superstitions over the beauty of the world, the bitterness of prophecy was as yet only occasional.

*Romney Marsh, Summer, Piper Play, A Runnable Stag, St Michael's Mount*, show how keenly and to the last he felt the joy of nature *Song for the Twenty-fourth of May* placed him among the Imperialists But the superficial talent of the lyrics and ballads in which he anticipated the Georgian photography of moments masked a turgid unrest rising uppermost in the several *Testaments* written between 1901 and 1908 His militant materialism, incapable of irony, spent itself unprofitably in a spate of Nietzschean pamphlets "Man is the Universe made conscious" "I suffer, I am God this Self . . . is greater than the universe." His gospel of self-aggrandisement, although based on recognition of science, pity for others, and desire for a new world, brought little of poetic value save infrequent passages of soaring rhetoric Davidson groped through thickets of verbiage after a vision which he could never fully comprehend His superman lisped in numbers incoherent and vain The sadness of his career, the modernity of some of his notions, must not make us forget that Davidson committed poetic suicide

Among poets whose preponderantly literary background and devotion to scholarship set them apart from the movements already mentioned we may place Sir William Watson, Robert Bridges and Laurence Binyon Self-conscious heirs of the aureate strain in English poetry, of Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson, steeped in the classics, they carried on after the 1914 War a tradition against which younger men were in open revolt Memories of "the mighty poets" and especially

. of the Romantics haunted the muse of Sir William Watson So he expressed his patriotism in Wordsworthian sonnets, his love of nature in echoes of stately rhetoric Some of his best work is in the epigrams commenting on his reading, on the discipline of art, on the bitterness of politics and his personal disappointment And the clear, cold temper of his submission to formal authority showed to advantage in such lyrics as *When Birds were Songless* and *Thy Voice from Inmost Dreamland Calls*

Very different was the effect of the poetic past on Robert Bridges "What led me to poetry was the inexhaustible satisfaction of form, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the masterly control of the material" But he was more than a mere technician, though he brought a deliberate craftsmanship to lyric, narrative poem (*Eros and Psyche*), and poetic drama The first volume of *Georgian Poetry* was rightly dedicated to Bridges, for he handed on the love for "the mighty abstract idea of beauty in all things" which he received from Keats , from him as well as from the Impressionists already mentioned the Georgians took their lyrical technique, their love of the moment, their joy in natural beauty The offspring of *Spring goeth all in white*, *The upper skies are palest blue*, and *Who has not walked upon the shore*, are legion, as a glance at *Poems of To-day* will prove

An Elizabethan simplicity marks much of Bridges' work (e.g. *I will not let thee go*, *Gay Robin is seen no more*, *Crown Winter with green*) In the sonnets of *The Growth of Love* the meditative movement of

Shakespeare's calmer love-poems was given to a passion at once Victorianly domestic and Dantesque in its refinement and spaciousness. That love extends beyond sex to include the whole scheme of things his poems on an ocean liner (27), on growth (39), on sleep (48), on the saints (64), would show without the Spenserian avowal

All earthly beauty hath one cause and proof,  
To lead the pilgrim soul to beauty above (35)

The last of the platonic poets, he avoided the hedonism of the Decadents and the sentimentality of the Georgians, for beauty to him was an ethical and intellectual principle, and his *Testament of Beauty* is a noble reflective poem, fruit of a comprehensive imagination which ever sought to "reconcile Passion with peace, and show desire at rest." Contemplating human life in his old age, Bridges transcended rather than solved modern problems by his faith in idealism and the evolutionary power of mind. *The Testament of Beauty* was the final flowering of the Victorian spirit. If it misses greatness it is by a certain slowness of passion, an exteriority of development. But although it lapses at times into bald didacticism, it rivals Lucretius, and contains more fine passages of description, reminiscence, and argument than any other poem of our day. Some of the ethical disquisitions recall in their grandeur the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* which assisted Bridges' invention of his "neo-Miltonic syllabics."

Writing in 1912, Bridges spoke of the "blunted

tool " of Wordsworthian blank verse and declared " Any one may see that serious rime is now exhausted in English verse, or that Milton's blank verse practically ended as a serious form with Milton " Free verse " cadence," however, did not attract him His attempt in the lecture *Humdrum and Harum-Scaram* to make free verse from a passage of Milton by dividing the lines irregularly suggests that he did not appreciate the aims of experimenters in the new form, though he certainly marked some prevalent weaknesses when he asserted that the rejection of metrical systems must result in loss of carrying power, in self-consciousness, sameness of line structure, and indetermination of subsidiary accent His own experiments owed much to the initial promptings of his friend Gerard Manley Hopkins (*q v*) and although he felt that it would be impossible " to base the whole art of versification on speech-rhythm," his new prosody, with its daring variations in accentual pattern, proved his desire for freedom in following what D H Lawrence called " the hidden emotional pattern that makes poetry " His attempts at classical hexameters and pentameters were not successful, but left him with an excessive regard for quantity, and with a mastery of long curving measures which he used to the full in *The Testament of Beauty* If at times his " loose alexandrines " were wilfully imposed on the natural speech-rhythm of his lines, they form a definite contribution to the development of English verse

Like Bridges, Laurence Binyon developed from

a purely lyrical towards a contemplative view of the world, but his individuality was less surely expressed "I praise indifferent Nature Still like an artist she her meaning hides," he declared in a fine sonnet, and his earlier work sprang from a gaiety clothing itself in bright impressionistic water-colours His natural reflectiveness slowed his verse (in spite of Shelley's influence) and led him to the irregular ode and a sober rhetoric which devitalised many of his longer poems As he himself wrote

O words you live, and therefore you can die  
Dead things may kill , and you being dead entomb  
The frozen thought that once you clothed in bloom ,

and his later discursive poems suffered from a burden of verbal immortality Yet in *The Sirens* and *The Idols*, where the study of Dante gave a new terseness to his statement of modern social problems, Binyon was enabled by his faith in man to reveal the "Baffled heart, cloudy vision," and to point hopefully to the "undiscovered world that round about us lies "

Break the word and free the thought,  
Break the thought and free the thing !

he cried, and if his own poetry lacked the fullness of this liberation, he summed up some needs of his generation and of our own

His experiments in poetic drama were not very successful, and the idea of his *Madness of Merlin* (unfinished, published 1947), in which he used the story of the northern Merlin to throw light on problems of to-day was better than its somewhat

Yeatsian embodiment But his last volumes showed how delicate and fine a flame of lyricism burned in him to the end In *The North Star* (1941) several pieces descriptive of Japan and of the Mediterranean have an oriental precision, and *Angkor* is a long and lovely reflection on the ruined temples. There is grave wisdom in *The Way Home* where he prefers actuality to dream—

I like the stark form  
Of the tree standing up without mask  
In stillness and storm  
Nothing of nature's fault or the years'  
Slow injury glazed

This honesty in mind and art endures in the posthumous volume *The Burning of the Leaves* (1944), where he comments on the proud mastery of the machine whose

captive

Force, and willed conformity, stamped exactness  
But O divine diversity of creatures  
Where are you? Not here amid man's contrivings  
None can repeat you, none complete nor annul you  
(*Ezekiel*)

And the last, uncompleted poem *Winter Sunrise* snatches hope from the grip of war —

The flower of winter remembers its own season  
And the beautiful shadow upon the pale wall  
Is imperceptibly moving with the ancient earth  
Around the sun that timeless measures sure and silent

Naturally enough an age of religious questioning included an opposed tendency towards authority and tradition. Hence a Catholic revival attracted

many who found assurance and beauty in the dogma and ritual of the Church , and what may be called a Catholic movement in literature revived religious poetry and assisted in the return to favour of writers long neglected—the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century The importance of this may be judged from the fact that the greatest single force in poetry to-day, Mr T S Eliot, belongs to the Catholic tradition, and that both he and Mr Herbert Read praised the Metaphysicals at the expense of Milton, whom they used to regard as a bad influence diverting the main stream of English poetry

The Oxford Movement in the eighteen-thirties had been the first symptom of a reaction against changes in our civilisation that had their counterpart at the close of the Elizabethan period It was a time of intellectual unrest, when conventional religion was beset by sectarianism and unbelief, when the established social order was tottering under the attacks of new ideas and new classes Once more the new philosophy was putting all in doubt Against this anarchy the Catholic poets harked back to the authority of the Middle Ages, to a theological view of the world , they all underwent some sort of religious conversion, wrote very emotionally and made experiments in imagery and rhythm Slight Metaphysical influence had been apparent in Keble's *Christian Year*, Newman's *Gerontius*, *The Cathedral* and *The Baptistry* of Isaac Williams, and the work of Christina Rossetti, but it was the special office of the later Catholic

poets to restore something of the "passionate ratiocination," the fusion of intellect with emotion, the dynamic structure, and the wit, which we associate with Donne and Herbert

One could hardly call *The Angel in the House* a Metaphysical poem, although Coventry Patmore had already (1857) attained in a measure to his final view of human love "What a Lover sees in the Beloved is the projected shadow of his own potential beauty in the eyes of God" But just as Donne and Vaughan turned from earthly love to the pursuit of the divine, so after the death of his first wife in 1862 Patmore's poetry shifted its emphasis and style The poems expressing his grief as husband and father reveal a passionate intensity new to the age *The Azalea* and *Departure* are the very rapture of anguish His conversion to Catholicism in 1864 heightened the spiritual nature of his work He read deeply in the mystics Though he declared that until 1881 he did not know Crashaw, he had certainly read Donne, Vaughan and Drummond of Hawthornden The bulk of his later verse consisted of irregular odes in which he used a coiling involution of structure and thought, a skill in wordplay, that owed something to seventeenth-century models as well as to similarity of experience

Patmore was no ascetic , he praised God in the world, and saw the Unknown Eros as the lord of marriage as well as of virginity His praise of the body resembled Traherne's Regarding physical love as a symbol of heavenly love, he wrote a prose

treatise drawing intimate parallels between them, but burned it when his friend Hopkins declared it too daring for publication Crashaw lived again in his fusion of erotic sensibility with religious aspiration, as in *Deliciae Sapientiae de Amore* In *Victory and Defeat* he portrayed the vicissitudes of the spiritual life in a manner reminiscent of Herbert, combining a simple symbolism taken from fishing, flying or warfare, with semidramatic moments of dialogue between the soul and God

The form of the Odes may seem more lax than the octosyllabic stanzas of *The Angel*, restraint may be less external, and it is true that some of the later poems are backboneless and diffuse But in *Amelia*, *The Azalea*, *Auras of Delight* and the *Psyche* series (to mention only a few) the experiment justified itself and Patmore achieved what he called "the great decorum of passion, which keeps, and is immensely increased in force by, the discipline of God's order" His frequent mastery of inherent form, and the poignancy with which passion and thought strike home at once, make Patmore a revolutionary poet

Shall I, the gnat whuch dances in thy ray,  
Dare to be reverent?

he asks, and this is sufficient defence of the quips and tricks of surprise, the commonplace imagery, with which the aspiring intelligence, conscious of its infinitesimality, proves its assurance of ultimate grace

The poetry of Alice Meynell, for all its chaste

reserve, also played a part in the reunion of intelligence and passion "Her feelings spring from her mind, her thoughts from her heart There is room in them for a wit that is the weapon of the rarest tenderness," wrote a *Times* reviewer Her early love poetry revealed a unique subtlety of mood Her Italianate sonnets had a simplicity lacking in Rossetti, one of her masters—a simplicity born of precise thought and unambiguous use of words She owed something to Keats and Shelley, but soon developed an organic structure from Jacobean models, and freed herself by the force of her religion from some of the commoner romantic assumptions

Though she sympathised with the poet's power of seeing himself in nature (*The Love of Narcissus*), she recognised that he could never know full communion with "the earth's wild creatures" "There is something they deny thee" Behind the beauty of natural forms lurked a secret

O daisy mine, what will it be to look  
From God's side even of such a simple thing?

Her attitude resembled Vaughan's ("Thou little veil of so great mystery"), you may hold infinity in the palm of your hand, but you will not comprehend it in this life Her gradual realisation of the limitations of human powers corresponded with her growing discipline of form She thought much about technique Conscious of the continuity of poetic tradition, she felt the weight of this immortality (*A Song of Derivations*), and envied the

early poets their potential discoveries In *The English Metres* she delighted in the responsibilities and freedom of traditional forms, while *The Laws of Verse* treats their limitations as a means to the highest flights Formal discipline and spiritual discipline were one, for, like the late Abbé Brémont, she held a mystical view of poetry as participating in the phenomenal yet having its essence in heaven "The poet's imageries are noble ways," but must not be confused with ultimate poetry itself

Plain, behind oracles, it is , and past  
All symbols, simple , perfect, heavenly-wild (*The Courts*)

Strictly Metaphysical influence is apparent in her rhetorical development of argument, in her dramatic approach, her use of dialogue, her homely similitudes She had Patmore's epigrammatic power without his excess, and because of her inner severity she did not break through the received forms of the stanza Hers was a chastened delight Such popular anthology pieces as *The Shepherdess* and *November Blue*, though they have little of her most significant thought, reveal her graceful economy

Alas ! now wilt thou chide, and say (I deem)  
My figured descant hides the simple theme,

wrote Francis Thompson to Mrs Meynell in the epilogue to *Her Portrait* *The Courts* embodies her comment on his excessive love of sensuous imagery

He took over Patmore's irregular ode without the latter's intellectual grip , "a greater Crashaw," Patmore acclaimed him, but he was a Crashaw steeped in Coleridge (as in *Sister Songs*), and Keats,

Browning and Meredith (as in *A Corymbus for Autumn* and *Ode to the Setting Sun*) A natural affinity led him to translate some of Victor Hugo's magniloquence, and he resembled De Quincey in his love of involved verbal music as well as in his London adventures

Yet Thompson was no mere eclectic His finest essay, *Paganism Old and New*, helps us to perceive his peculiar quality He used a pagan wealth of sensuousness in the service of his religion, and his accumulation of gorgeous images suggested the variety of God's creative power (e.g. *To the Setting Sun*) Of "illuminate and volute redundancy," irritating neologisms, heavy Latinate forms, his work affords too many examples, yet his style was in part a rebellion against the contemporary æsthetic narrowness of "miniature finish," and his experiments justified themselves in the poems already mentioned, in the *Poems on Children*, parts of *Sister Songs*, and *The Hound of Heaven*, where the story of God's pursuit of the soul is woven into a vast tapestry of ornate metaphor In the *New Poems* (1897) the growing influence of Patmore showed itself in a more mystical tone *The Dread of Height* revealed a striving after a "difficult Joy" hitherto unknown to him That this might have schooled his manner is suggested by the simplicity of *Any Saint*

In Thompson the Romantic and the Metaphysical meet but rarely fuse He helped on the movement towards flexibility of expression, but his grandiloquence and centrifugal temper had little to offer

his successors His poetry, like Patmore's and Alice Meynell's, is no longer influential Far otherwise with that of Gerard Manley Hopkins

Although Hopkins died in 1889, his friend, the late Robert Bridges, did not dare to publish most of his poems until 1918 , they seemed too eccentric in style, with their Browningesque rhymes, their " rove over " enjambement (set danc/ ing blood , minion King/ dom of), their use of *tmesis* , (brim, in a flash, full *for* brimful in a flash), and of coined words (windlaced, fallowbootfellow) Nor did Bridges approve of Hopkins' experiments in rhythm, which comprised not only the free use of substitution and equivalence in the ordinary " running " measures, but a revival and development of what Hopkins called Sprung Rhythm, namely, the accentual, alliterative measure of Langland and Skelton, which had dropped out in the sixteenth century Furthermore, Bridges was incapable of sympathising with the poet's peculiar religious temper But if his appreciation was limited, his caution was more salutary than the immoderate enthusiasm of some later critics. Hopkins was the most original poet of his time, and the most intense, but his range was narrow, and he himself saw that some of his mannerisms would be well away

| " No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness " (he wrote in 1879—and his later work reveals a progressive simplicity) " I hope in time to have a more balanced and Miltonic style But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music,

and design in painting, so design, pattern, or what I call *inshape* is what I, above all, aim at in poetry. Now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inshape to be distinctive, and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped.'

His was "The fine delight that fathers thought" Seeking immediacy of expression he used the idioms of ordinary speech (hence the need for new metres), but also an elliptical language, omitting relatives and compressing phrases into compound or portmanteau words. His poetry was born of a struggle with syntax. Interjections, parentheses, sudden stops or returns, were results of this spontaneity. How finely in description he could capture "The roll, the rise, the carol of the thing," the octave of his irregular sonnet *The Windhover* illustrates How closely there the rise and fall of rhythm, the runs of unaccented syllables, the interplay of similar rhymes, and the alliteration, suggest the flight of the falcon!

Hopkins had rare sensuous endowments which he refined and offered to his God. *Spring* is full of "all this juice and all this joy" *Pied Beauty* expresses a delight in delicate contrasts which extends to things of the spirit as well as of sense. It was natural for him to see the universal love in external loveliness

Wind-beat white-beam, airy abeles set on a flare!  
 Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!  
 Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize,  
 for "May-mess" and "March-bloom" were  
 symbols of the inner Christ. But that his God was

one of terror too *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875) shows Metrically a *tour de force*, yet revealing new rhythmic possibilities, this surprising poem is full of storm, agony, and the mystery of God's ways to men Such an apprehension found its most personal application in the later sonnets through which Hopkins related his own struggle with God It is as though Donne were born again with a softer, more tremulous nature

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,  
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost  
Defeat, thwart me?  
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain (50)

In the light of all these achievements it is absurd to condemn later Victorian poetry for romantic conventionality and lack of "adult male intelligence" By their assiduous pursuit of the poetic moment, the flash of ecstasy, the Victorians gave dramatic force and variety to the lyric , this and the new impressionistic approach paved the way for later experiments They are accused of "evading" the life about them , on the contrary, they often portrayed aspects of the contemporary scene too crudely for true art If some rebelled against urban life and "supped on country pleasures childishly," others sought inspiration in the city There was a prevalent and growing consciousness of intellectual and social problems which, however, had not then reached their present catastrophic urgency Their work shows a gradual abandonment of the archaisms and artifices of the Pre-Raphaelite school Even in the more academic

writers a breath of air banishes enervation—foretelling new winds to come They followed up the experiments (often ignored to-day) of Tennyson, Browning and Meredith, in the vernacular Bringing new vigour into old rhythms they also carried on Arnold's tentative fumblings after freer verse-forms, hammering out fresh accentual measures, and exploring some possibilities of quantity and of irregular rhymed structures Writing in a time of ferment when the forces at work were as yet scarcely assimilable by the imagination they were the first poets of an age of transition that still goes on They initiated the modern French influence If it be true (as Mr F R Leavis declares) that "wit, play of intellect, stress of cerebral muscle" is a cardinal feature of modern verse, the Victorian Catholics at least introduced something of these qualities To a greater or less degree these poets realised the limits of individualism, the need for order, discipline, ritual , returning to scholasticism, mysticism and the seventeenth-century poetry which had last embodied these, they restored old subtleties of feeling, and opened up new possibilities of expression for passionate reflections upon the mysteries of the universe

## CHAPTER TWO

W B YEATS AND WALTER DE LA MARE

IT is not within my scope to tell the story of the Irish Renaissance or to deal with minor poets whose significance is properly confined to the literature of their own country "A E" (George Russell) by his achievement stands apart from these, but even his influence was not important in England. Mention should be made of Lionel Johnson, a disciple of Pater, who achieved in life and art his desire "to burn always with a hard gemlike flame." A convert to Catholicism and to the Celtic movement, his attitude to both was sophisticated to a degree. His classical training, his intellectual powers, distinguish him as a religious poet from the Franciscan simplicity of Katherine Tynan, and as a "Celtic" poet from the glamorous day-dreaming of most dabblers in romantic legend. It is significant that the editor of his *Collected Poems* was Ezra Pound.

For our purpose W B Yeats may well stand as the representative of the Irish school. He has also been a prime influence for fifty years in England. A comparison between his work and that of Mr Walter De la Mare throws light on the current tendency to what has loosely been called "the poetry of dream," and on the difference between a dynamic and a static imagination.

In *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), with its bright tapestries of legendary figures, its regret for the glories of a simpler civilisation, Yeats strove to do for Irish what Morris had done for Scandinavian myth, and the lavish foreground of the Pre-Raphaelites appears in his decorative pictures of imaginary lands. He spun out the brief fragments of the Ossianic cycle into dyeshot gossamer with Tennysonian heroics and Swinburnian rhetoric. With a dexterous use of couplet forms he evoked a poetry of revolt and escape which became in *The Rose* (1893) a deliberate campaign to "sing the ancient ways" of Cuchulain, Fergus, and old Eire in narrative and dramatic poems. Sometimes reminiscent of Swinburne in imagery and rhythm, sometimes achieving a more personal note, he developed in his lyrics a wistful suggestiveness. His most popular poems, e.g. *Innisfree*, *The Rose of the World*, *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, are full of this romantic nostalgia.

"I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians" (*The Trembling of the Veil*)

But this was not the whole story, for these traditions and stories derived their validity from an ambiguous Celtic tradition, partly religious, partly magical.

And the indefiniteness of this background, its participation in several levels of culture, appealed to the young poet, though the spiritual power which he vaguely perceived was not Beauty, nor the Christian God, nor a Lord of Magic, but a blend of all three. His love of magic, his studies in telepathy and spirit-lore, were rather an æsthetic toying with imaginative counters than a search for an absolute essence. This distinguishes his poetry from that of A E., who was no magician but a true mystic, and wove myth and legend into theosophic symbolism.

Nearer to Thee, not by delusion led,  
Though there no house fires burn nor bright eyes gaze,  
We rise, but by the symbol charioted,  
Through loved things rising up to Love's own ways  
By these the soul unto the vast has wings  
And sets the seal celestial on all mortal things

Because of the coherence of his religious thought, A E. with a limited talent gives an impression more homogeneous and natural than the early Yeats. The importance of the latter's work lay not so much in its content as in the method of expression. Believing in the existence of a universal "great mind" and a "great memory" which could be "evoked by symbols," he came to regard both imagery and rhythm as incantatory of universal emotions. Shelley's poetry became palatable to him only when he realised the symbolism inherent in the recurrent images of leaves, boats, stars, caves, the moon. In his own verse the rose, white birds, foam, the wind, became means of conjuring moods rather than sensations.

"Blake," he declared (in 1897), "was a symbolist who had to invent his own symbols. He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand, had he been a scholar of our time he would have gone to Ireland." Yeats's meaning was not so clear or so profound as Blake's, and one questions whether the Celtic mythology as he took it over preserved its old vitality and did not become too readily a vehicle of mere fantasy.

He came, too, under the influence of French *Symbolistes*, especially admiring Verlaine, Villiers De l'Isle Adam, and Maeterlinck. In the *Autumn of the Body* he described (1898) how he found "in the arts of every country those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies" to which he had himself turned. Rebelling against Parnassian exteriority and English impressionism, he hoped that with "the casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms as of a man running and we would seek out those wavering meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination."

He copied the Symbolist aim to evoke a complex of emotion not by direct statement but by a multitude of indirect strokes. In *The Wind among the Reeds*

(1899), the affinity is marked. Here a great increase in the proportion of mythological to natural imagery is noticeable. The symbolism of "God stands winding his lonely horn," of "your image that blossoms as a rose in the deeps of my heart," is obvious, but a more recondite symbolism derived from magical studies involved *The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers*, while such lines as the following demanded a commentary

Do you not hear me calling, white deer with no horns ?  
I have been changed to a hound with one red ear ,  
I would that the Boar without bristles had come from the West  
And had rooted the sun and moon and stars out of the sky  
And lay in the darkness, grunting, and turning to his rest

Such a learned symbolism, backed up frequently by references to the world-ranging anthropology of Sir James Frazer, Yeats was the first to present in English poetry. We shall see its reappearance, with a deeper significance, in T S Eliot. Here it is almost purely decorative, and (despite his theoretical distinction in *Symbolism in Painting* (1898) between allegory and symbol) allegorical, that is, superimposed by the intellect upon emotion

At this time form was all in all to him , his pursuit of beauty was deliberate and somewhat "decadent" , very salutary no doubt in the heyday of Kipling, but tending to an accumulation of epithets and an excess of word-music. Yet his Celtic enthusiasm preserved freshness within the limits of this artificiality, and poems like *The Song of Wandering Aengus* or *He wishes his Beloved were Dead* have energy and controlled fancy

Certain poems of *In the Seven Woods* (1904) (e.g. *Never Give all the Heart*, *The Arrow*, *The Old Men*) revealed a change in the direction of Yeats's development, made clearer by what he wrote in 1906 (*Discoveries*) about Verlaine's assertion "that the poet should hide nothing of himself"

"Without knowing it," he declared, "I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into poetry, and had understood this as a representation of my own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but as I imagined the visions outside myself my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life The more I tried to make my art deliberately beautiful the more did I follow the opposite of myself Presently I found that I entered into myself and pictured myself and not some essence when I was not seeking beauty at all, but merely to lighten the mind of some burden of love or bitterness thrown upon it by the events of life" Now, to attain "style, mastery, that dignity and that lofty and severe quality Verlaine spoke of," he saw that "we should ascend out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market place, of men of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole" He still held that "all art is dream," but it was now a representation of the waking dream of life, not merely of racial memories Banished were the indistinct meandering emotions, the sophisticated heroism He turned to face his

growing bitterness in an Ireland no longer filled with fairies His struggles with the national theatre made him reflect in 1910

The fascination of what's difficult  
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent  
Spontaneous joy and natural content  
Out of my heart

But only this could save his poetry from mannerism and produce the mature work in which "passion and precision have been one" If at times he met disillusion harshly, at others he achieved the nobility of *To a Shade*, and *To a Friend whose work has come to Nothing* He had to discover that "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" before he could achieve an iron simplicity and correctness whose nearest parallel is in Ben Jonson

In *A Coat* he tells how his petty imitators stole his song  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies,

and dismisses them with the reflection

there's more enterprise  
In walking naked

So *The Green Helmet* (1910) and *Responsibilities* (1914) contain not only disgust at a life where "all things at one common level lie," but an epigrammatic force, an economy of utterance which can be tested by comparing *A Woman Homer Sung* with the cloudy, pretentious *The Rose of the World*

Yeats's increase in stature is revealed in these volumes by the manner in which he reworked old

themes, as in *When Helen Lived*, *Fallen Majesty*, and the poignant *Friends*

His later volumes, too, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1933), and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940), show him responding

To that stern colour and that delicate line  
That are our secret discipline

in landscape and life He turned from books to men , though at times he felt " That the heart grows old " and " The living beauty is for younger men," he reached a maturity of vision from which an astringent, athletic quality emerged, and he justly hoped to

Dine at journey's end  
With Landor and with Donne, (*To Young Beauty*)

for he wrote many a

Poem maybe as cold  
And passionate as the dawn (*The Fisherman*)

Cold passion , that is the clue to his new use of words Previously they had been symbols with a penumbra of indefinite associations , now they were chastened and defined, their ex crescent tendrils lopped. Small wonder that Yeats influenced, and was influenced by, the Imagists A *Thought from Propertius* might almost have been written by H D. Under the stress of this new severity the suave rhythms gave place to more broken, freer measures, owing something to free verse as well as to Georgian experiments in " substitution "

His old interests survived, love of dream (*Presences*), the memory of beautiful women (*Memory, His Phoenix*), admiration of simple joy (*Tom O'Roughley*), of youth (*To a Young Girl*), of the lost civilisation , but these were expressed with a new (often ballad-like) decisiveness, permeated with reflection. Symbolism recurs obscurely in *The Double Vision of Michael Robartes*, but in the main any difficulties encountered in the later poems are due to terseness rather than to indirection

He withdrew more and more to the solitude of the mind, but this does not mean that he wished to escape the complexities of his last twenty years In *The Second Coming* he saw the time as ripe for a new advent

Things fall apart , the centre cannot hold  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity

But the *Second Coming* did not necessarily mean peace and purification

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born ?

It was a “terrible beauty” that he discovered in *Easter 1916*, and, in *A Political Prisoner*, a sense of human suffering

Because his heart was torn by the struggles of

That crafty demon and that loud beast  
That plague me day and night,

he seized the more unerringly on his moments of respite, and, in his wishes for his daughter, bestowed

on her all those gracious and quiet qualities most difficult of attainment to-day In *The Tower* (1928), with its symbolism of retirement and study, he sought peace after unrest as he freed himself from the world Not without hatred of "Decrepit age that has been tied to me," he announced his renunciation of active life, but

Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination, nor an ear and eye  
That more expected the impossible

The sonnet *Leda and the Swan* has all his early Pre-Raphaelite colour, while *The Tower* itself is a collocation of "images in the great Memory stored" that gives the lie to his surrender This volume indeed has a new richness of feeling and diction after the acidity and asceticism of the previous years *A Prayer for my Son* heralds a Jacobean grace seen also in the series *A Man Young and Old* Regrets remained, but with the weakening of the passions came an inner balance consolidated in the 1933 volume, *The Winding Stair*

Here still in

A storm-beaten old watch-tower,  
A blind hermit rings the hour, (*Symbols*)

but the soul has found that age need not mean a living death or abstraction

He could now contemplate outer events, the state of poetry, his own past, the passions of the young, seeing them all *sub specie aeternitatis* "Everything that is not God consumed with intellectual fire"

In early life his subjectivity was purely emotional , now the insistence was on intellect Epigrams, gnomic verses, now recalling Blake, now the Japanese *hokku*, prove the completeness of his mastery He could face the spectacle of the artist at odds with life coolly (*The Choice*), while death seemed no longer a triumphant victor

The freeing of his spirit is revealed in the many songs of young love, as in *Words for Music Perhaps*. In *A Woman Young and Old* the thin music of Housman swells to a richer cadence His pilgrimage was a long one, but he at last conquered the craving for a mystical experience , in a brief dialogue expressing the victory of the Heart over the Soul, he announced both the conflict of his life and its resolution .

*The Soul* Seek out reality, leave things that seem  
Look on that fire, salvation walks within  
*The Heart* What theme had Homer but original sin ?

More and more in the last years he strove after a new "popular" poetry adapting the song, the true ballad (*The Three Bushes*), and the broadside (*Roger Casement*) according to the formula " Music, the natural words in the natural order," so that he fulfilled as never before the ideal he had shared with Synge and Lady Gregory

All that we did, all that we said or sung  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antæus-like grew strong

The "soil" might be the wild moods of drunkards, crazed girls, revolutionaries, but in the main it was

the quintessential wisdom of an old man disillusioned yet not without moments of joy, recalling dead friends, the warmth of hopes now thwarted, irked by flagging health but still passionate (" My poetry all comes from rage or lust ") To the last, as the *Letters on Poetry to Dorothy Wellesley* show, he experimented in patterns of common speech shot with intense images, now steel-cold, now all living flame, which made him the one great poet of our age

Mr Walter De la Mare has done much more than rewrite *The Child's Garden of Verses* in the manner of Yeats, yet it is doubtful whether he would have found himself without the latter's influence. He, too, worked by suggestion, and ventured to the brink of the unknown, but the boundaries of experience past which he trespassed were those of memory and premonition and in particular the inevitable walls separating the child from the adult. In him romantic love for the child appears shorn of its usual moralities and decked out with all the fanciful ingenuity of nursery lore, no other writer has been so successful in the weaving of charming nonsense and the objective narration of incidents common to sheltered and imaginative childhood. Had this been all, his work from *Songs of Childhood* (1902) to *Peacock Pie* (1913) would have been insignificant enough. But from the first he had mastery of verbal rhythm and a power of evoking an atmosphere of wonder tinged with fear. He showed the influence of Blake, Coleridge, Christina Rossetti, Yeats, and of the ballad. His

own originality, however, appeared in such poems as *John Mouldy*, where the childish propensity for myth-making produces a novel effect of the macabre, and in the unaffected *naweté* of *The Fly* and *The Rainbow*, where the world is seen simply or speculatively through the eyes of a child. Such songs of innocence form the staple of his child-poetry.

*Poems* (1906) introduce a maturer note, in which, with a more ambitious purpose, an occasional affectation and heaviness of style intrudes. Here the joy of childhood has given way to the regrets and thwartings of manhood. *Keep Innocency*, in its praise of the simple and inviolable steadfastness of the child, is in effect a lament for a loss which in *Foreboding* he sees as the inevitable work of time. But the greatest evil of life is solitude. No heart is open to another he feels (*In Vain*), using the image of knocking upon a locked door, he that cries, "Who called? Who cares?" hears only an echo. Man's aspirations, his pursuit of knowledge and power, are the result of this lack. Mr De la Mare allows him no external guide, and the sadness of his verse springs partly from this absence of assurance. Even virtue is barren and destructive, though he clings to it, he knows not why (*Virtue*), and though he preaches immortality (*Where is thy Victory?*) one feels that it is largely because life is otherwise unbearable.

We must bear in mind the essential pessimism of these songs of experience in approaching *The Listeners* (1912). For the best of his later poems depend for their peculiar atmosphere on proximity

of shadow to sunlight, of age to youth, sorrow to joy. Almost always there is the imminence or the memory of loss. Parting, death, solitude or the unknown, are ever within the margin of his poetic consciousness. He is haunted by contrasts between day and night, by the various depth of darkness (*The Shade*), by the passing of the seasons' beauty, above all by effects of moon and starlight, with their evanescence, their sterile peace, their transmutation of the world. His deliberate evocation of dream resembles Yeats's early Celtic visions in so far as it springs from a revulsion from ordinary life, but it lacks intellectual substance.

The sensitive adult in him finds solace in three ways in "the quiet steeps of dreamland," which mean for him "the waters of no more pain," as well as a purer form of experience (*Nod*), in the fascination of death's mystery (*Where?*, *Exile*), and in the recreation of childhood. Mere memory is not enough, since that recalls the loss of hope and love (*Spring*). The free play of fancy excited by names (*Arabia*) and nostalgic words (*Never-to-be*, *The Dwelling-Place*) may unburden the soul of some of its sickness. But his imagination is most controlled in poems realising the child's unambiguous acceptance of both the actual and the fairy worlds, and the child's first apprehension of the burden of life. To the former belong *Martha* and the *Four Queer Tales of Peacock Pie* (1913). To the latter belong *Miss Loo* and *The Sleeper*, the one recapturing something of the child's shrewd feeling for personality and environment, the other suggesting

most vividly the childish dread of "death's twin-brother" For the rest, the 1912 volume showed an assured mastery in the undefined suggestion of "unknown states of being," as in *Silence*, *Winter Dusk*, and in *The Listeners*. And here we may note a difference between the supernatural beings of Yeats and those of Mr De la Mare, a difference which strikes deep. The mythology of Yeats has a national significance and its figures are powers to some extent independent of the poet, by their place in tradition and in religious symbol. But the "phantom listeners" of Mr De la Mare are the projection of subjective sensibility. Though his rhythms sometimes recall Yeats, Mr De la Mare's imagination is more like Poe's,

He combines an almost *irritable* sensuousness with an intense physical curiosity. An early sonnet (*The Happy Encounter*) notes the kinship between poetry and science, his children marvel at the microscopic eyes of insects (or even, as in *Memoirs of a Midget*, possess them), and they reflect upon the bodily processes (*Miss T.*) The poet himself wonders at the variety of creation (*The Scribe*), but in *Motley* (1918) and *The Veil* (1921) he dwells on the limitations of body and mind until the eyes become "strange devices that alone divide the seer from the seen" (*Eyes*). Dream gives a mastery which waking denies, but he knows well the unprofitable end of its habitual exercise (*The Dreamer*). Yet the life of those who are querulous of life's meaning is no more fruitful.

Obviously such a mind is doomed never to achieve

a coherent faith, or the final stability in which Yeats grappled with the actual. Its sufferings are not illuminated by a larger significance, unendowed with metaphysical vision, it dwells within a besieged city, and returns baffled and despairing from each sally into the unknown regions without. Hence he cries "Be not too wildly amorous of the far," and falling back upon the goodness of God, concludes .

Humble thy trembling knees , confess thy pride ,  
Be weary (*The Imagination's Pride*)

Into *The Veil*, where the burden of human suffering is felt more strongly than before, enters something of Hardy's belief that the divine in man is the cause of his misery. In such moods the fairy world becomes a demon-world ; the magic border-land of fancy touches on a perilous country. Yet as fear grows, and solitude deepens, a new power and intensity are added to the verse. Though the technical accomplishment remains constant, the poetry increases in profundity, for actuality replaces fantasy, and to the incantation of images is added the symbolism of a deep spiritual disturbance.

The failure of his attempts at a more realistic poetry shows the limitations of Mr De la Mare's talent. His is a poetry of suggestion, not of delineation , his realm is set in ambiguous moods where love of life minglest with love of death, fear blends with curiosity, and charnel thoughts—as in so many Jacobeans—go beautifully dressed. The Jacobean reference is apt, for the likeness extends to many of

his stanza-forms, and to his use of a diction whose mingled simplicity and decorations have affinities to Shakespeare and Webster. For the enchantment of

Speak not—whisper not,  
Here bloweth thyme and bergamot

an archaic gesture is essential, only an unthinking critic would condemn him for his occasional inversions, his avoidance of ordinary speech. The reminiscent grace of his language and music is the necessary instrument of his peculiar function, as can be seen by the failure of his Georgian imitators, who tried to do the same things in a more familiar idiom and looser measures.

Mr De la Mare has written one important long poem *The Traveller* (1946), consisting of 142 five-foot quatrains, is an apparently simple allegory of a lifelong

secret craving of the soul  
For what no name has, flower of hidden stem  
The unreturned of boundless land and sea,  
Venturers, voyagers, dreamers, seers—ay, them  
The Angel of Failure hails with rhapsody

The Traveller (perhaps he who once knocked in vain at a forest-door) journeys in old age through beautiful but sinister landscapes reminiscent of Coleridge and of the romances of David Lindsay and C S Lewis, and described in contrasted symbolical colours with much of the poet's old evocative skill. The vast plateau, "smooth as porphyry, Its huge curve gradual as a woman's breast", the

great "convex of blood-red stone" with "Forests of fungi in the lichenèd rock", the plain of

Turquoise and sapphire, speedwell, columbine  
When clouds minute, like scales of fish are seen,  
Dappling an April daybreak, then, divine  
As Eros' eyes, there shows a blue between

the Traveller's dreams, the "shapeless shape" of Fear, the black desert, the moonlight, the anguish of the dying man and his faithful steed, all these have some of the poet's evocative power, but lack the direct intensity of the shorter poems. It is *The Waste Land* of a phantasist, speaking vaguely to the emotions and teasing the intellect with doubt of the relevance of intellectual interpretation. Mr De la Mare is not what is popularly called a "thinker". He is a poet of exquisite sensations and emotions. His rank depends not on the bulk of his work but on its incantatory power, its sensitive craftsmanship, its explorations of evanescent borderline moods, and on the coherence with which it expresses the several facets of a delicate imagination.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE GEORGIAN TRADITION

WE are now able to state that English poetry at the beginning of the present century showed at least five significant tendencies or attitudes —

- 1 A scholarly tradition going back through Tennyson and Wordsworth to Milton and the Elizabethans, refining on old themes and forms
- 2 A Catholic movement with affinities to the “Metaphysicals” and other religious poets, often making use of intricate or irregular verse-forms and ornate or witty imagery
- 3 An “æsthetic” tendency owing much to the Pre-Raphaelites, and attracted, in its romantic nostalgia, to legend and to subtleties of verbal suggestion working often through symbolism and “dim” verbal music.
- 4 A tendency to “realistic” impressionism based on an acceptance for imaginative purposes of modern city life and commonly found in conjunction with quasi-prosaic imagery and irregular rhythms

- 5 A "naturalistic" reversion to the simple life of countryside, sea, and open road, allied to bold swinging regular rhythms and romantic natural imagery

All these were combined in various ways in what has become known as "Georgian" poetry. When Edward Marsh in his prefatory note to *Georgian Poetry* (1911-12) wrote "This volume is issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty we are at the beginning of another Georgian period which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past," he was mistaken if he meant that the poets under his banner had made any breach with the past. Yet there was novelty and community of aim among such contributors as Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke, W H Davies, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, W W Gibson, John Masefield, Harold Monro, Edward Shanks, James Stephens, W J Turner, and Sir (then Mr) J C Squire. The novelty consisted in a reawakening of lyrical fervour, the community in an implied protest against the pressure of a changing civilisation.

By 1911 Mr Bottomley, Mr Masefield and Mr Gibson had been before the public for several years. To treat of their work first will be helpful in preparing for a summary of the characteristics of the loosely associated movement which they joined.

The earlier work of Gordon Bottomley owed much to the school of Rossetti and Pater. His

inspiration best remained in some way related to other products of the artistic imagination, hence such sonnets for pictures as *A Lady of Paris Bordone* (1898), and "*L'Apparition*" of Gustave Moreau (1899), and the three longer studies on designs by C H Shannon, *The White Watch* (1900-4). A heavily-jewelled style was his natural inheritance, though like others nurtured on the nineties he worked effectively in the ballad manner (*Calvary Talk*). Another corollary, interest in æsthetic problems, produced the three hymns *Touch*, *Form*, and *Imagination*, where sensuousness wedded rhetoric. Since much of his other poetry and poetic drama was inspired by literature — by Shakespeare's tragedies (*Rosaline*, *Gruach*, *King Lear's Wife*), and, following Yeats, by Celtic Tales (in *Lyric Plays*), a certain remoteness as of light filtered through gauze might be expected of it. But if this is apparent in Mr Bottomley's poetry it is due not so much to his themes as to the view of poetic drama that he in common with most recent practitioners before Mr Eliot accepted.

This view was stated by Lascelles Abercrombie in his essay on *The Function of Poetry in the Drama* (1912). The revival of realistic prose drama had brought literature back to the stage, but left dissatisfied many who were not content with "an imitation of the ready-made boot of existence." The Georgians, in their reaction against the exquisite poses of Wilde and his fellows, emphasised the eternal passions of the human heart, and if they loved also the accidental circumstances of life,

they sought in poetic drama a form which "neglects the outer shells of reality, and directly seeks to imitate the core. Or rather, it seeks to imitate in you the effect which would be produced if you perceived with certainty and clarity the grand emotional impulse driving all existence."

This attempt to free drama from the imitation of ordinary external existence raises a primary problem as soon as the poet approaches a contemporary theme. He must suggest the environment without sacrificing poetic intensity. On the whole the Georgians failed here. In Masefield, Gibson, and Abercrombie prosy actuality enters in familiar speech, colloquialisms, domestic trivialities. The emotionalism and decorative imagery of Masefield's *Nan*, Abercrombie's rhetorical and generalised treatment of superstition in *The End of the World*, did not produce good drama. But in the main these poets used romantic tales from history or legend, thus avoiding a difficulty which Mr Auden and his friends have faced with some success. Bottomley's *Gruach*, Abercrombie's *The Fool's Adventure* and *Judith*, Masefield's *Philip the King* and *Good Friday*, are all divested of trivial circumstance.

By aiming at the quintessential, poetic drama tends to fail in action and character. And when, as often in Abercrombie, there is no thought of the stage, its figures become ideal qualities, long set speeches take the place of dialogue, and a series of moral disquisitions from divers points of view is substituted for movement. From this error

Gordon Bottomley was freer than most of his contemporaries

If Mr Bottomley continued the "aesthetic" tradition into the new century, Mr John Masefield stood at first among those who most sincerely rebelled against urban civilisation, and yet at the same time took over from the Impressionists the love of realism, and from the Irish their melancholy

After considerable experience of danger and adversity at sea and in New York, Mr Masefield returned to England and devoted himself to journalism and literature, publishing his *Salt Water Ballads* (1902), *Ballads* (1903), and *Ballads and Poems* (1910). Various influences were apparent in his early work. In *Salt Water Ballads* he appeared as a sea-Kipling without the patriotic gospel. Not for him the songs of empire, but the woes and gallantry of the under-dog (*A Consecration*)

To this preoccupation with suffering, endurance, lost causes, he remained faithful. Without Kipling's stridency, he related his anecdotes and impressions of the seaman's life in powerful rhythms owing something to the shanties as well as to the barrack-room tunes. His vernacular was that of the urban illiterate, dependent for its effect on the closeness to actuality of its slang and mispronunciation. His technical terminology was that of the sailing ships. His realism, however, was crossed by other strains. Something of Stevenson's romantic attitude survives in *A Ballad of John Silver* and *The Tarry Buccaneer*. And from the first a strain of escapism in him suffused the open-air bravado of

R L S and Henley with the wistfulness of the early Yeats. Hence such poems as *D'Avalos' Prayer*, *The West Wind*, *Vagabond*, *Tewkesbury Road*.

The history of Masefield's career is that of an attempt to reconcile two elements of a divided imagination—his keen observation of the actual and his desire for a life of refined decorum. His recognition of the inevitability of human passion led him to enjoy violence of action and speech as evidence of humanity and vigour. His sympathy with the unfortunate refused to accept ugliness and brutality at their face value. Hence the series of narrative poems, *The Everlasting Mercy*, *The Widow in the Bye Street*, *Dauber*, and *The Daffodil Fields*, in which he tried to show how the spirit may transmute vileness to beauty. The attempt, however, was too deliberate. Until *Reynard the Fox*, at least, the reconciliation between ideal and actual was not complete in his imagination. A poem like *Cargoes* gains its success by the contrast between a picturesque past (romantically described) and the ordinary present. Masefield's strength lies indeed in impressionism and in decorative reminiscence—as in *Ships*, *The Wanderer*. He fails when he tries to explore subtleties of personality. (The success of *Pompey* does not disprove this assertion.) And in the early narrative poems the beauty that he sees rising through the sordidness of circumstance or of human nature at its weakest strikes the reader as a theoretic assertion, rather than as a quality inherent in the minds and behaviour of the personages. So in *The Everlasting Mercy* (in which he elaborated

the theme of an early Yeatsian lyric *Vision*), he first of all drew his poacher, Saul Kane, in lurid colours by a series of rapid impressionistic sketches—poaching, swearing, fighting, making love, drinking, running amok—which display an uncommon skill in narrative, despite an occasional flatness of diction and metre. The preparation for the spiritual conversion which is the crisis and the *raison d'être* of the poem is, however, scantily done and the climax itself is too briefly described, the sudden illumination of a soul is inadequately shown, while the joyous pictures of the countryside with which the poem ends are insufficient to portray Saul Kane's change of heart, and have no inevitable relation to the scoundrel of the first part of the poem. Lyricism is not enough. This weakness of characterisation marred *The Widow in the Bye Street* and *The Daffodil Fields*, where the delineation of his people was not full enough to give significance to prosaic details of country life and superimposed passages of lyricism or reflection. *Dauber* is saved, not by its long-drawn pathos of an artist uncomprehended by his fellows in his search for beauty ("Rot though it be its prompting is divine"), but by passages of objective description of sea and ship in which (*e.g.* rounding the Horn) the broken rhythms and feeble imagery of transcribed dialogue give place to a freer movement and a noble suggestion of man's conflict with the elements.

The conscious pursuit of beauty is a perilous ambition for any artist. A fatal feature of the "Decadence" was its separation of beauty from

the other categories, and we may perceive traces of the heresy in the work of Robert Bridges, as of many other poets who came under the influence of Keats and of the "philosophy of the moment" popularised by Pater's *Conclusion*. Sceptics who denied the existence of absolute truth and goodness clung to the notion of an absolute beauty, and, unable to enjoy their moments of heightened consciousness "simply for those moments' sake," deified the æsthetic idea. In *Biography* Mr Masefield turns from mere chronology and ignores the development of personality, insisting in this, one of his best pieces, on "hours of life that were a burning fount." He concludes

Best trust the happy moments What they gave  
Makes man less fearful of the certain grave,  
And gives his work compassion and new eyes,  
The days that make us happy make us wise

In the sequence *Lollingdon Downs* (1917) he builds a religion of Beauty on the subjectivist basis (XLIV), attempting to show that although "Here in the self is all that man can know of Beauty," nevertheless we may perceive

Beauty herself, the universal mind,  
Eternal April wandering alone,  
The God, the holy Ghost, the atoning Lord,  
Here in the flesh, the never yet explored (XXX)

Similar accumulations of vague imagery recur whenever Mr Masefield contemplates this absolute saved from the wreck of past faiths. He is not at home with abstractions, and those sonnets are best

in which he abandons the general conception for the analysis of particular moments

Of the sonnet form he makes a slow-moving vehicle for conscientious reflection. But he is not an economical writer even within its bounds, and his talent lies rather in the rapid use of loose four-stressed couplets and rhyme-royal.

In *Reynard the Fox* this gift showed itself to advantage, for here his study of Chaucer brought a new skill in low-pitched narrative and brief character sketch unspoiled by moral and pseudo-philosophical interludes. Two things attracted him to the theme—a hunt, the variety of types to be found at a meet, and the excitement of the chase itself. The result was perhaps his most successful long poem. Here his laxities of rhythm and phrase—though permitting such lines as

And one went whistling to the pump  
The handle whined, ker-lump, ker-lump—

are less obtrusive than usual, owing to the familiar tone of the whole piece. From Chaucer he took the device of a prologue (too long for what follows), describing the people at the meet, and also several tricks of technique, the rapid alternation of physical and other details, the use of negative understatement, simple idiom, and archaisms, and a quaint humour which bravely emulates the pointed slyness of his master.

In the hunt itself his strength and limitations are clearly seen. It is all physical sensation, yet how well suggested are the running of horses, the turns

of the chase, the eagerness of hunters and hunted *Right Royal*, where the poet sings that other English passion, horse-racing, is less successful. The story is trite, there is less sense of character and of the country-side. But it is in such genial and unpretentious poems of action rather than in his moralised epics of the under-dog, his stiff dramatic poems, or his Laureate formalities, that Mr Masefield's sense of actuality and his imaginative powers combine. For here he does not confuse brutality with vigour, rhetoric with passion, love of the external world with an unsubstantial metaphysic.

More successful in the depiction of the tragedy of poverty and labour was Mr W. W. Gibson, who wrote in *Daily Bread* (1910) of working people at moments of crisis, showing the womenfolk of miners, shunters, stokers, face to face with terrible situations, sickness, births, deaths, accidents. For Masefield industrialism and poverty were merely incidental to passion, to Gibson they were prime factors in defining joy and sorrow. Hence he is at once more faithful to fact and more consistent in characterisation. Yet when he writes in dramatic form the tendency to inflation that mars most modern poetic dialogue mingles oddly with his desire for external truth. In the narratives and dramatic monologues of *Fires* (1912) and *Thoroughfares* (1914) he avoided this difficulty as well as the pitfall of a too literal transcript of ordinary speech, carrying on the tradition of Wordsworth's *Michael* into the modern world of

fishermen, lighthouse keepers, policemen and miners, showing the dangers of their occupations, their plodding courage

His pictures in *Livelihood* (1917) of a drover out in the snow ("The Drove Road"), of a miner lost in the workings ("The Shaft"), of a simple servant girl out with a man ("The Swings"), of a labourer waking to love ("In the Meadow"), reach a greater intensity and a finer portrayal of thought-processes than do Mr Masefield's longer narratives

At times, as in the war poems, an excessive matter-of-factness robs his shorter pieces of the irony to which, following Hardy, he aspires. But although he lacks the latter's largeness of conception, being essentially interested in the feelings of individuals and not in their superhuman implications, he caught something of Hardy's bare intensity of depiction in the dramatic lyrics of *Neighbours* (1920). He was faithful to the more obvious teachings of the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in his resolute portrayal of the people about him he wrote a simple poetry in touch with modern life, and illustrates one way in which Georgian poetry developed out of the purely external impressionism of the nineties.

Masefield and Gibson were primarily narrative poets, but the chief achievement of Georgian poetry was in the lyric. The reason for this is clear. Georgian poetry sprang from the Victorian preoccupation with the individual's impressions and emotions. But in the rebellion against morbidity and preciosity it returned to the simpler manner of the Elizabethans and the early Romantic poets,

seeking in moments of contact with nature a heightening of consciousness which gained in intensity from the ever-present imminence of mortality Blake, Stevenson, Bridges and Yeats all contributed something to such moods, for the Georgians were essentially eclectic

The simplest and purest expression of the attitude was in the poetry of W H Davies, where a forthright naïveté regained the rapture of Nash and Dekker. His commonest mood was one of unsophisticated joy in birds and animals. His imagination was happiest when he banished thought and captured the moment of pleasure as it flew

A rainbow and a cuckoo's song  
May never come together again,  
May never come  
This side the tomb

He did not regret his incapacity for continuous reflection "on deep, eternal things" Though he could paint the bitterness of poverty, he preferred an irresponsible freedom "to stand and stare" Many others vied with him One thinks of Ralph Hodgson's *Song of Honour* with its not too successful reminiscences of Smart's *Song to David*, of John Drinkwater's *Nunc Dimitis*, of De la Mare's *The Scribe*, and a host of other crystals of unpremeditated rapture In town these poets thought of the country, using the slenderest of associations as a means of escape So Gibson in his office on a hot day watched a carter handling ice, and was transported to Polar snow and seals; so the greengrocer of John Drinkwater's *Lady Street* dwelt

imaginatively in Gloucestershire whence he obtained his

Fat cabbages and yellow plums,  
And gaudy brave chrysanthemums

There were scores of mild variations on the theme of Wordsworth's *Réverie of Poor Susan*. Occasionally, as in J C Squire's *The Roof*, an attempt was made at a more objective description, and here impressionistic effects of changing light and colour were used well. But, on the whole, Masefield's cry "London has been my prison" sums their attitude. For the Georgians city-life was a regrettable necessity. Nor were they at their ease with machines. Motor-cars, trains, telegraph-wires, aeroplanes, were mentioned with more or less bravado, but to them the machine-age was ignoble, and the use of imagery drawn from engineering and other technologies was repulsive. Their return to nature spelt a deliberate revolt against the industrial tendencies of their day. That for them was the social function of poetry in the twentieth century.

Allied to this were other romantic traits—local patriotism, love of animals, of country folk, of children. Regionalism they inherited from Hardy, Kipling, Housman and Yeats. It appeared in Drinkwater's praise of the Midlands, in Rupert Brooke on Cambridge, in the northern tang of Bottomley and Gibson. The love of animals was a century-old inheritance. In an ecstasy of fellow-feeling, Coleridge had invoked a young ass "I hail thee brother!" Harold Monro writing of

a dog or a goldfish was no less inept, while Squire's *To a Bulldog* failed as an elegy on a dead soldier because of the dog-lover's reminiscences to which it served as an excuse. The poetry of pets is one of the least successful aspects of the Georgian muse. On the other hand, hatred of man's callousness towards the smaller creatures produced some poignant pieces, such as James Stephens' *The Snare* and Hodgson's *Bells of Heaven*. Blake's humanitarianism afforded themes for many latter-day variations. More objective poems were written by Mr Edmund Blunden among others (*e.g.* his *Poor Man's Pig*). Hodgson's *The Bull* is, however, by far the best of Georgian animal-poems, for he admits the barriers between man and sub-human life, and suggests the mystery of the struggle for survival, the mingling of horror with the beauty of nature—ideas rare among his fellows, who set sentiment before science, unwilling to admit that the problems of instinct could not be solved by a little sympathy and good-fellowship.

Hodgson's tropical setting reminds one that the exotic was another traditional element in Georgianism. J. C. Squire's *Lily of Malud* (1916) was the most successful Georgian contribution to the cult of the negroid, which came to its height in the *Gold Coast Customs* of Miss Edith Sitwell. For most of these writers the wonders of the far were held in suspension by names used as symbols of centrifugal fancy. De la Mare's *Arabia* is the type of such associative thinking after the manner of *Kubla Khan* and *Yarrow Unvisited*. He, indeed,

carries us with him, but we are inclined to agree with the rationalists whose

cold voices whisper and say—  
He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,  
They have stolen his wits away,

when the trick of evocation becomes a commonplace, when Hodgson sighs for the glories of Babylon, J C Squire catalogues the great rivers of the world, and when W J Turner (in an early mood which he fortunately outgrew) confesses that he was a silent and inattentive schoolboy because

Chimborazo, Cotopaxi,  
Had stolen me away

The influence of De la Mare fortified the romanticism of his fellow-contributors to the anthologies in other ways. From him and from Blake, James Stephens learned to wish "he was a silly urchin still," and to describe incidents with the magnifying imagination of the child

I saw the Devil walking down the lane  
There was a giant by the orchard wall

But the simplicity of such poems is bald and insignificant, for Stephens' talent spends itself best in sheer lyrics of joy and pity, and in the whimsical humour of his Irish curses and anecdotes

Undoubtedly De la Mare fostered the preoccupation with memory which marks this school, and an appreciation of the half-apprehended notions, the obstinate questionings and blind misgivings of sensitive souls. But such tendencies

were inherited from earlier romantics and helped by the refining process which accompanied the weakening of the Wordsworthian fervour Georgian poetry is a poetry of moments of mild self-analysis Its romanticism is robbed by stale custom of "the first fine careless rapture," and driven into narrower and more tenuous ecstasies Below the fleeting shimmer of conscious experience it seeks, with James Stephens,

Something I can never find,  
Something lying on the ground,  
In the bottom of my mind (*The Goat Paths*)

Hence we find Squire's negro mothers seeking a lost memory and Sir John himself declaring

Deep in the sky and in my heart there works  
A thought I cannot reach (*At Night*)

He more than any of the others is conscious of the subjectivism which is the fount of the school In *The Mind of Man* he perceives the opposition between good and evil within the mind and the essential secrecy of the inner world, since speech, gesture, action, are merely intermittent symbols of the life below. Against the alien solidity of the objective world the mind pits its own vision, and at times, when "deep thoughts" triumph,

Clear but unreal is the scene outspread,  
Pitiful, thin, remote (*In the Park*)

Squire's poetry illustrates well the Georgian manner of resolving the dilemma Faced with ugliness and squalor, his first impulse is to escape by

insisting on the superiority of the inner world In a London restaurant he reflects "I, only I, am real here!" and in playing with associations which invest the sordid business of eating with a certain glamour, he is merely finding another way of escape from immediate actuality A more classically-minded poet—one who could accept the dichotomy of life and see it in the light of ethical, social, or religious ideas—might have written a satire in such circumstances But this was not the Georgian way

Squire realised to some extent the weakness of solipsism, for he admonished himself

This is the world in which you're fixed ,  
Never despise the things that are  
Hold fast this earthly star,  
The whole of it, the whole of it (*Ode*)

In the attempt to do so the Georgians frequently gave themselves up to the transcript of observed detail, witness Squire's *Rugger Match* But hold fast the whole of this earthly star they could not, since such a co-ordination demands an imagination founded in an order of ideas ✓ Their poetic experience, however, was bounded by sensations and sentiments, and they eschewed the "sub-conscious" though they paid lip-service to "the poetry of dream" Hence an occasional lyricism was their most successful vein

In further illustration of the achievements of the school, we may consider briefly Rupert Brooke and a gifted "outsider," Edward Thomas. Brooke

began by imitating Yeats and the Decadents, but soon became sick

Of seeming simple rhymes, bizarre emotions  
Decked in the simple verses of the day  
Modern despair in antique metres, myths  
Incomprehensible at evening,  
And symbols that mean nothing in the dawn

A bolder mood was to be his, as he showed in poems of anti-conventional cynicism. He was much occupied with the sheer joy of the body on the one hand (*Lust*), and with the incompatibility of body and spirit on the other (*Town and Country*, *The Hill*)

"In a flicker of sunlight on a blank wall, or a reach of muddy pavement, there's a sudden significance and importance and inspiration that makes the breath stop with a gulp of certainty" Such a passage links him to Pater, but Brooke was not content with the "æsthetic" position, and although many of the poems by which he is best known reveal him as a poet of the familiar, striving to become an artist in living by making the most of passing sensation (*Grantchester*, *The Great Lover*), he recognised that poetry must have a social significance "I don't know that 'Progress' is certain All I know is that change is," and that change "depends on me! With such superb work to do, and with the wild adventure of it all, and with the other minutes (too many of them) given to the enchantment of being even for a moment alive in a world of real matter . . . and actual people—I have no time now to be a pessimist."

Here we touch on what was perhaps the most important contribution of Brooke and his fellow-Georgians to literature. They all knew "the enchantment of being for a moment alive in a world of real matter and actual people," and if they ignored larger truths, at least they broke from the shackles of a purely literary tradition, from the bondage of second-hand emotions. So Brooke defended his *Channel Passage* "There are common and sordid things, situations or details, that may suddenly bring all tragedy, or at least the brutality of actual emotions to you." This might have been a fruitful thought. Because of it he fell in love with Jacobean poetry and drama. But when the war came he had not found himself, he was still experimenting with the amorous treacheries of the mind, and although in the 1914 *Sonnets* the life of sensation was enlarged by patriotic sentiment, Brooke had not entirely left the dilettante phase when he died.

Rupert Brooke "lisped in numbers for the numbers came", Edward Thomas had written some thirty books of prose in twenty years of hackwork before he discovered that verse might save him from melancholy and frustration. Though he knew many of the Georgians (*cf.* Gibson's poem *The Golden Room*), it was the American nature-poet Robert Frost who in 1914 persuaded him to write poetry. "Right at that moment," Frost later explained, "he was writing as good poetry as anybody alive, but in prose form where it did not declare itself . . . I referred him to paragraphs

in his book *The Pursuit of Spring* and told him to write it in verse form in exactly the same cadence That was all there was to it His poetry declared itself in verse form . . ." (Edward Thomas, by R P Eckert (1937), p 150)

Perhaps there was a little more to it than that , but the individuality of Thomas's poetry depended on a new naturalness of movement which came from avoiding conventional verse-forms and the remnants of poetic diction found even in Masefield and Brooke His special technique was in a cadence between song and conversation (e g *The Gallows, Words*), anticipating Robert Graves and the later Blunden , and in a sinuous precision which improved on the coarse and slapdash texture of many Georgians "Dimness and lack of concreteness I shall certainly do my best against," he wrote to Richard Garnett, who did not appreciate his music, and " I think you read too much with the eye perhaps ", his verses must be read aloud in an intimate way

Inevitably the work that first gained Thomas critical praise was of the fashionable kind (*Addlestrop, If I should ever . . .* ), and he was always a charming observer. But his most characteristic pieces looked inward to harmonise the conflicts and self-mistrust which had burdened his life for years (cf H Thomas, *World without End*) The clean barenness of *When first The New House, The Signpost*, the symbolic imagery of *Lights Out* and other experiments show what an accomplished poet was lost when he was killed by a shell in 1917

## THE TREND OF MODERN POETRY

Georgian Poetry was an Indian Summer of Romanticism , but it cannot be dismissed as an ineffectual anachronism It is true that its poets were minor figures , that its achievement lay mainly in the short lyric , that it eschewed philosophy, satire, the "sublime," that its forms were traditional But this is true of most Elizabethan poetry. Poetry may deal with current social and intellectual problems, but it is ever an affair of individualities, and we have no right to depreciate a poet, or a group of poets, because they comment on their age by negative implication rather than by direct statement Sir Edward Marsh was justified in perceiving a freshness of outlook among his contributors ~~x~~ The Georgians revitalised naturalism, and if they lacked the intellectual powers of Wordsworth and Shelley, they gave to the romantic stream a new turn which was really enforced by the contemporary situation. So long as man loves the world about him, so long as he remains sensitive to the life and forms of nature, so long as he has moods of mild meditation, whimsical self-analysis, revulsion against urban and social shackles, poetry of the Georgian kind will satisfy a vital need Nor must we ignore the diversity of their technical accomplishment, their facility in stanza-forms, their loosening of verse Their experiments in the approximation of diction and movement to those of ordinary conversation anticipated the general lowering of poetic pitch that marks our age from its predecessors. Such a lowering of pitch demands the utmost economy

and pregnancy. The Georgians frequently confused the lyric with current and garrulous forms of the essay. They fell into the banal and the trivial in sentiment and imagery, the prosaic in rhythm. But the value of their experiments in a familiar poetry of commonplace incident lit by fancy, and their tentative probing of conscious thought-processes, is insufficiently recognised to-day.

Yet their influence persists, for many of them are still writing, and their manner has been imitated or adapted by younger poets, some of whom might be surprised to be linked with them. There is a Georgian strain in Spender and Day Lewis and Rex Warner, in Alun Lewis and Roy Fuller, among others, and even Mr Eliot has shocked his more solemn disciples by showing (in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939)) a knowledge of those animals equal to Harold Monro's, and a gift for light verse almost equal to Hilaire Belloc's or A P Herbert's. But I cannot explore these amiable aberrations. There are poets wholeheartedly in the Georgian tradition and others related to it more loosely.

Mr G Rostrevor Hamilton is notable, in the dozen volumes he has published since 1918, for the charm and variety of his graceful lyrics, full of the sights, sounds and atmosphere of the country life, alive to the personalities of people, the incongruities of life, the troubles of the modern world. He carries on the moods of W H Davies and other Georgians, an acute observer of the little things.

of life, he comments swiftly on men and things—the Antiquarian,

“ delving in the closely-packed  
Dim-lighted basement of his brain,”

the farmer in Langdale turning his hay, the sickness of our generation (*Hospital Ward*), and he cloaks a fine sense of tragedy beneath a polished economy of statement. The classicism of his epigrams shows itself in all his work, and his *Invocation* may stand for his hope for poetry as well as for man's life in general

Redeem our faith, our hope  
From vanity ! Engrave upon our vision  
The human image of divine precision,  
The lovely finite, clear in limbs and feature

If the best work of Mr Hamilton owes its success to the study of the Greek and Latin epigram, that of Mr Laurence Whistler goes back to the ballad. In his more ambitious works, such as *Ode to the Sun* (1942), his grief at the darkness over the world is expressed in a fluent rhetoric that fails to move the reader by excess of catalogue and repetition. He lacks Hamilton's power to prune and refine. The allegory of his long *Thais* poem, *The Dancer in Darkness*, is thinly presented, but in plain narrative as in *Rollo Latimer* and *Jacob Pennycuik* he finds his true *métier*, as in the former poem where the old clergyman sees a vision of his son announcing his death in action.

Other poets keep alive the delights of *trivia*. So Claude C Abbott and Andrew Young write of nature and everyday life with delicate grace, Stanley Snaith catches the spirit of the northern

countryside, John Arlott describes the fairground, the "local," the second-hand bookseller searching for poetry he has never read

With that deaf searcher's hopeful frown  
Who knows the nightingale's a bird  
With feathers grey and reddish-brown  
*(Of Period and Place, 1944)*

Ian Serraillier, in *The Weaver Birds* (1944) writes light fairy-tales from all over the world with dexterity and charm

On the whole this second generation of Georgians has more formal precision but less energy than the first. Miss Ruth Pitter combines a sense of the grotesque (in *Mad Lady's Garland*, 1934) and of the fun of common occupations (in her gardening-rhymes, *The Rude Potato*, 1941), with a pellucid lyricism at times worthy of Alice Meynell or De la Mare (in *A Trophy of Arms* (1936) and *The Bridge* (1945)). Anne Ridler's *The Nine Bright Shiners* (1943) is a more important work, for she brings to her poetry of young motherhood a training in old and new "metaphysical" verse which blends her thought and feeling in organic rhythm, without loss of simplicity and tenderness.

Sleep, little honey, then sleep, while the powers  
Of the Nine Bright Shiners and the Seven Stars  
Harmless, encircle the natural world  
Lifegiving, neutral, unless despoiled  
By our greed or scorn And wherever you sleep—  
My arms outgrown—or waking weep,  
Life is your lot you lie in God's hand,  
In His terrible mercy, world without end  
*(For a Christening)*

Reverting to the manner of the eighteenth century, Miss V Sackville-West has revived the bucolic "didactic" poem which served for reflection rather than instruction. *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946) are both interesting poems by one—"by birthright far from present fashion"—whose poetry is a solace in troublous times.

Small pleasures must correct great tragedies,  
Therefore of gardens in the midst of war  
I boldly tell  
    making the necklace of a gardener's year,  
A gardener's job, for better or for worse,  
Strung all too easily on beads of verse

She has no patience with the poetic "cat's meat of defeat," and will "The land and not the waste land celebrate," which leads her to deny Mr Eliot's insult to April as "the cruellest month"

April, the angel of the months, the young  
Love of the year Ancient and still so young  
Lovelier than the craven's paradox,  
Christ's Easter and the Syrian Adonis  
When all things turn into their contrary,  
Death into life, and silence into sound  
And all the flow'rs like Botticelli's flow'rs  
Small, brilliant, close to earth, and youngly

(Spring )

Her descriptions of country pursuits, and her staunchly conservative comments on tradition and breaches of tradition, make Miss Sackville-West a very readable essayist in verse.

Three poets of stronger individuality, branching out of the Georgian stock, must now be considered.

namely, Mr Edmund Blunden, Mr Herbert E Palmer, and Mr Robert Graves

A gradual enrichment of matter and form over thirty years of continual writing has now made Mr Blunden the most distinguished modern exponent of the older Romantic tradition. In an age when so many reputations go up—and down—like rockets, it is rare to find so long and consistent a development. His early books, *Pastorals* (1916), *The Waggoner* (1920), *The Shepherd* (1922), etc., earned him fame as “a picturesque interpreter of the English countryside.” With quiet charm he embalmed memories of particular places in southern England, of old houses and barns, of rain and sun playing on lanes and trees and water. The spirit of peace suffused his verse.

Here be rural graces, sylvan places,  
Bright-hearted brooks that chanting fall,  
Leys and fallows, reedy rustling shallows,  
Colours and music rusticall (*Wild Cherry Tree*)

And he made the pleasures of fishing or walking in the country all the brighter because he had known war and described it with equal veracity, if with less success (because of the impossibility of communicating the impact of 1914-18 in mildly descriptive forms). Reading in the English poets developed his mastery of an elegiac technique and gave him moments when

on a sudden arose  
The mist of magic, and old haunted ground  
Shone with the Spirit who to young wonder glows

He might have remained a modern Clare or Cowper or unmystical Wordsworth but for the influence of Hardy and the Metaphysicals, which deepened his thought and sharpened his power of song (cf *Reunion in War*, *Intimations of Mortality*, *To Joy*, *The Age of Herbert and Vaughan*, *Familiarity*, and the later pieces in *Collected Poems* (1930) generally) His power increased as he looked more inward, without ignoring the message of the natural world—in *Halfway House* (1932) and later volumes

I am for the woods against the world,  
But are the woods for me?

he asked, but for the most part he saw nature's wonders as hieroglyphs of the spirit, relied now less on Fancy ("delicious false one") than on Memory (*Fancy and Memory*), and was more able than before to speak freely of the meaning of love (*Verses in Reminiscence and Delight*) His verse, schooled by gracious conversation with reflective poets of all ages, became accomplished in many lyrical forms The quiet athleticism of his craft was consummated in *Shells by a Stream* (1945), and we are grateful for his inability to follow the new cults

I hear fresh hours appeal, I mark the flow  
Of daring wits, they promise well I go  
Where older friends are singing (*The Home of Poetry*)

He is faithful to the "first things" in his imagination, to books and meadows, religion, the assurance of love in man and woman, the graces of character, to a world where "The haze upon

the meadow Denies the dying year" and where  
*A Prospect of Swans* recalls

Right near the town's black smoke-towers and the roar  
Of trans bearing the sons of man to war,

a "picture of some first divine intent," a primæval pattern of unity now lost The spirit of Walton and Cotton breathes through *Dovedale on a Spring Day*, and all this poetry is enriched by acquaintance with the best in literature (*Gibbon in the Margin*, *To the Memory of Coleridge*) He appreciates the sterling worth of men he knows (*Octogenarian*, *One Kind of Artist*, *The Boy on Leave*) and what wins him is not the bombast of *Tigranes* but

A gentleness, a strength, the way  
That first was meant the heart of man  
Should go when meeting the unsolved hours,  
And so few can (*The Fine Nature*)

If at times he wonders whether man is one of Nature's failures (*Nature and the Lost*), it is without Hardy's bitterness For the second war has not destroyed his hope , there are still good men and wise , we still respond to the beauty of the world , and "the announcement of unfaltering love" fills him with joy His later lyrics have perfected a freedom and sureness of phrase and tilt

Graces in the air, or from earth or wave  
Have taken me, wooed me along,  
And made my memory a happy slave,  
Set the range of my saying or song (*Among all these*)

The satiric parodies in Mr Herbert Palmer's *Cinder Thursday* (1932) were critical manifestations

of his adherence to a poetry far-removed from that most current at the time. For he looks back beyond the printed word to the songs of the scop, the jongleur, to the folk-ballad and the street-ballad, seeking always "to create for the speaking voice, to delight the listening ear". While some of his moods recall the natural pleasures of the Georgians, his self-consciousness is bardic rather than introspective, and he chants with a vivid gusto that atones for some crudities of phrase and feeling. His solitude is that of one who remained true to passion and spontaneity in an age of intellectual complexity. Phrases of a swift, bright completeness (notably in *Summit and Chasm* (1934)) show how fully he realises "that the body and the soul of Poetry should be one".

I have looked into the forehead of the old  
 And seen a bony jade at gallop  
 And a horseman lean and cold   (*The Cell*, 1929)

He is notable for impetuosity of onset and coloured clarity of image. The violence of his hatred (e.g. in *The Gallows-Cross* (1940), with its crude satire on Nazism) is equalled only by the delicacy of his love—for the outcast, for heroism, nature, truth, and poetry itself.

I will put a stark song in thy mouth ,  
 Swords shall slant from thy nostrils  
 But the quick-running brooks of thy heart  
 Shall sigh like far rock-rills                   (*The Song*)

Always intensely subjective, Mr Palmer's art is

at its best when he can ignore what he thinks wicked and base

Mr Robert Graves has made some devastating attacks on the "anthology-pieces" of the Georgians, yet he is in fact a link between them and the more abstract schools of recent years. His mental growth as well as his poetic accomplishment makes him one of the most interesting of living poets. From the first the effect of his work came rather from a popular simplicity than from traditionally ornate images. He loved the familiar fancies of nursery rhyme (*Wild Strawberries*), the pregnant dialogue of the ballad (*A Frosty Night*, *The Cupboard*, *True Johnny*), and the "jangle-jingle" of John Skelton.

He struck what Milton missed,  
Milling an English grist  
With homely turn and twist                                  (*John Skelton*)

In drawing upon these influences for a rapidly-moving poetry, careless and vivacious, Mr Graves differed from the Georgian poets. His carelessness and vivacity also differentiated his early poems of childhood (*Allie*), and of ethical reflection (*Song One Hard Look*) from those of De la Mare. Traces of the latter's method remain in the sadder poems written after the 1914-18 war (*Lost Love, Reproach*), and even in the wartime *Corporal Stare*. That the war radically affected the quality of his imagination is shown, not by such poems as *Goliath and David*, or *Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon*, but in those written between 1920 and 1923, where the nightmare of his *Escape* is perpetuated in a long troubling

of the spirit Morbid dreams (*Down, Incubus*), studies in "possession" (*The Gnat*), tales of ghosts and evil creatures, witness to this. The poet's interest in the psychology of the unconscious brought a new symbolism into his treatment of old wives' tales and superstitious fancies which now seemed

Thunderclaps of man's despair  
In mid-whirl of mental storms

In *The Pier-Glass*, a tortured mind gradually relieves itself of the repressed memory of a crime. *The Snake and the Bull* is a study in the futile repression of sex-desire. The imaginative assimilation of Freudian teaching in such poems is an achievement of profound poetic significance. D H Lawrence was his nearest kinsman in this respect, but Graves brought to bear a wealth of intellectual subtlety which Lawrence lacked. The increase of the intellectual (quasi-scientific) element in his self-analysis led Mr Graves later into complicated allegory and obscure disquisition as he came more under the sway of current philosophies and esoteric literary models. His poetry becomes cerebral and Metaphysical, not so much by its abstraction and wit, as by its preoccupation with psychological problems, the relativity of knowledge, the problems of identity, discontinuity of experience, dissociation of personality. Difficulties that De la Mare states lyrically, he explores with introspective ingenuity. When his intellect is the instrument, not the master of his mind, he passes from the sick

horror of *The Children of Darkness* to the reasonable acceptance of *The Rainbow and the Sceptic* and *Knowledge of God*, where he ceases

to run the head against these blind walls,  
Enter the dungeon, torment the eyes  
With apparitions chained two and two,  
And go frantic with fear      (*Casile*)

Yet for years he never ceased to rebel against the ineluctable limitations of the mind. There was no escape from his subjective conflict. He projected it into his story of *The Chipped Stater*, that fine allegory on the transmogrification of his friend T E Lawrence.

His *Warning to Children* of the infinite reduplication, the patterned incoherence, of this Chinese box of a world, might serve as a parable of his own mind as it was in *Poems 1914-26*. His imagination seemed like a snake that had turned on itself, eaten its own tail and continued in a narrowing circle of rumination until the head was consuming itself.

Since then his work has grown more stable, terse, and controlled in thought and form. The later pieces in *Collected Poems* (1939) show him accepting the disharmonies of life calmly and with irony, studying human beings with a new objectivity. His imagery is concrete but does not reverberate; it derives its force from thought. His rhythms are traditional but sinewy, and the final effect of his recent poetry is of a trained intelligence schooling emotion to a somewhat cold yet lively and delicate observation, disciplined and crystal-clear in expression.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE IMAGISTS

THE lustrum before the 1914-18 war was marked by a growing cosmopolitanism. The Russian Ballet brought new colour to music and the stage. Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and other continental fashions obtained devotees. Marinetti preached in London the gospel of Futurism, anticipating by half a generation the later worship of the machine. A restlessness ominous of approaching upheavals grew among the intelligentsia. For the first time for two hundred years it seemed as if England might become, intellectually, part of Europe.

The Imagists first came to public notice, like the Georgians, in a series of anthologies—*Des Imagistes* (1914), and three other collections—*Some Imagist Poets*, in 1915, 1916, and 1917. The chief members were three Englishmen—T. E. Hulme (no poet, although Mr Pound published the *Collected Poems*—5 pieces, 33 lines in all—with his own *Ripostes* in 1912), F. S. Flint, and Richard Aldington, and three Americans—Ezra Pound, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, who married Mr Aldington in 1913), and Amy Lowell. No apology is needed for discussing here American as well as English poets. But for them the school would never have reached public attention, for although the intellectual impulse came from Hulme and the first technical teaching from Mr

Flint, it was the Americans who, coming from a country of no stable poetic tradition, and looking on foreign cultures without insularity, crystallised tentative ideas into a programme

Imagism grew out of a Poet's Club founded in jest by Hulme in 1908, and out of subsequent plans for revolutionising English poetry by *vers libre* and adaptations of the Japanese *tanka* and *haikai*. Mr Pound invented the term "Imagist" and made the first anthology in 1914, with pieces by H D, F S Flint, A Lowell, James Joyce, F M Hueffer, W Carlos Williams, and himself. Later he fell out, and Amy Lowell took command, but after 1917 the school as such ceased to exist, partly because of dissensions, partly because its original theories no longer satisfied its members.

T. E. Hulme was killed in the war, but his fragmentary *Speculations* give the æsthetic basis of the movement. He was a Bergsonian, and just because he suspected logic and preached the truth of intuition, he rigorously demanded precision of expression. Inspired by Remy de Gourmont's *Problème du Style*, he revived the cult of the Word from which most recent poetry springs. Essentially anti-romantic, he felt, like Worringer in Germany, that modern life brought disharmony between man and nature. Against the humanism introduced by the Renaissance and widespread since Rousseau he constantly inveighed, since it made man the measure of all things and led to theories of democracy and perfectibility.

"Here is the root of all Romanticism that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities, and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order, then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress. One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite to this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him" (*Speculations*)

The affinity between his ethic and his æsthetic is further shown by the following passage —

"I object even to the best of the romantics. I object still more to the receptive attitude. I object to the sloppiness which doesn't consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other. The thing has got so bad now that a poem which is dry and hard, a properly classical poem, would not be considered poetry at all. How many people now can lay their hands on their hearts and say they like either Horace or Pope? They feel a kind of chill when they read them. They cannot see that accurate description is a legitimate object of verse. Verse to them always means a bringing in of the emotions that are grouped round the word infinite. But the particular verse we are going to get will be cheerful, dry, and sophisticated, and here the necessary weapon of the positive quality must be fancy" (*Ibid*)

Again, he wrote in his *Notes*, "Poetry is no more nor less than a mosaic of words, so great exactness

is required for each one," and sought "always the hard, definite, personal word," "each word with an image sticking on to it, never as a flat word passed over a board like a counter" (cf *Criterion*, July 1925) Like de Gourmont, he emphasised unduly the sensuous, even the *visual*, nature of thought "All emotion depends on real solid vision or sound It is physical" This over-emphasis provided the Imagists with their technique and limited the subject-matter of their poetry

The principles of the group have been briefly summarised as (1) direct treatment of the subject , (2) economy of presentation , (3) the doctrine of the image , (4) the use of organic rhythm "An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," wrote Mr Pound Wishing to load every rift with ore, to make every phrase a concrete image, they neglected ideas "Go in fear of abstractions, that is, use concrete images having the hardness of cut stone " (Pound) "Do not attempt philosophical or descriptive poetry "

In the main the Imagists carried on the work of the Impressionists, substituting the more direct use of analogy and metaphor for the diffuseness of the Georgians, whose trains of loose suggestion they despised They sought the presentation of objects at the very moment of their impact on consciousness, with the utmost intensity of immediate emotion Ezra Pound admitted kinship to the great egoist Walt Whitman, though he called him a "pig-headed father" But the egoism of Whitman

was that of the ordinary man raised to a higher power by his zest for the fullness of life, while the individualism of the Imagists was limited by its narrow interests and æsthetic creed. His loose, comprehensive method was the very opposite of theirs. They indeed aspired towards the "pure poetry" on which much has been written in France by the late Abbé Brémont and Paul Valéry. The theory was evolved in the first instance by Edgar Allan Poe from isolated remarks of Coleridge.

"I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of a poem is in the ratio of this elevating the excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychical necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so-called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues, and then the poem is in effect, and in fact, no longer such" (Poe, *The Poetic Principle*).

This neurotic conception is belied by the facts, but it fortified the Imagists in their elimination of expository, narrative, didactic, and descriptive matter, and supplied a convenient dogma to support their pre-occupation with the short poem. For the theory seemed to prove that Homer and Milton had merely produced a series of short poems linked by flat stretches of prose. In their search for the poetic absolute the Imagists and their successors ignored a prime factor in the architectonics of the

long poem, namely, that here (as in drama) the unity of a large conception is subserved by variety and contrast in emotional intensity. In the organic structure of all good traditional long poems, advantage is taken of psychological variations in attention. James Thomson marred his *Winter* by attempting to raise all his themes to the same level of intensity, but Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth (at his best) succeeded by their use of variable tensions.

So long as the Imagist theory was rigidly applied, preoccupation with sensational impressions made the long poem impossible. When experience brought some members of the group to a wider circle of emotions, the original theory gave place to a more liberal practice as poets like Pound, Aldington, Read, and Eliot struck out on their own paths. But the return of the long poem was marked by a fear of the discursive and the expository. Hence, as we shall see, arose a new technique, in which association, symbol, and allegory took the place of logical or chronological sequence. The difficulties of this kind of poetry have been searchingly analysed by Mr John Sparrow in *Sense and Poetry* (1934). He fails, however, to appreciate its real achievement, partly because of his legitimate impatience with the cant of "modernist" camp-followers, partly because, in his love for what Pater called "the hard, logical quasi-prosaic excellences that (verse) has or needs," he limits meaning to the paraphrastic summary, and in practice denies intelligibility to all poetry where significance

is evoked by the synthesis of parts rather than explicitly set forth in an "argument"

It is the distinction of the Imagists to have brought English poetry once more into vital contact with the literature of other countries. French influence on the "Decadents" had meagrely survived the nineties, which never reached the heart of the Gallic mystery. The new school approached later French poetry with a better understanding, and temporarily changed the course of English poetry by their studies. But they owed much in form and imagery to Oriental influences also. "Some of the best Imagist poems are pieces of less than half a dozen lines, not so much epigrammatic (though classical influence often enters) as pictorial and impressionistic, modelled upon the Japanese *tanka* or the *hokku*. The *tanka* consisted of 31 syllables in 5 lines (57577), the *hokku* had 17 syllables in 3 lines (575)."

"The most famous *hokku* that Basho wrote might be literally translated thus 'An old pond / And the sound of a frog leaping / Into the water.' The poem has three meanings. First, it is a statement of fact. Second, it is an emotion deduced from that. Third, it is a sort of spiritual allegory" (J. G. Fletcher, Preface to *Japanese Prints*). Since the Japanese words had more than one meaning, such poems drew their complexity from "a sort of serious punning." It was difficult to obtain the same effect in English; hence Imagist imitations of Japanese forms were less densely suggestive, frequently dropping the allegory altogether. The

*Oread* of H D , cited by Ezra Pound as a typical Imagist poem, is of this kind

Whirl up sea,  
Whirl your pointed pines  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks  
Hurl your green over us—  
Cover us with your pools of fir

Pound's own *Alba* is an even purer example

As cool as the pale wet leaves of lily-of-the-valley  
She lay beside me in the dawn

Chinese poetry with its greater expansiveness also attracted the experimentalists , hence Pound's arrangements and imitations in *Cathay* (1915) and *Lustra* (1917)

A certain interest in exotic aspects of Eastern life had entered painting and literature with Whistler and Wilde In the work of James Elroy Flecker we may perceive a transitional phase between the "æsthetic" school and the Imagists proper. For he combined the traditional romantic view of the East with a desire for formal discipline derived from Parnassian and later French poetry Out of this admiration came the evocative manner of his *Taoping* and *A Ship, an Isle* ("a very subtle poem . . . and when you read Henri de Régnier you will find some more") Though Flecker never lost the decadent tone which sounds through the jewelled speech and tinsel music of *Hassan*, he shows that it was possible for a poet to rebel against the Georgian manner while remaining unsympathetic to

Imagism itself Like many Imagists he made no clear distinctions between the various French schools

In a valuable treatise on modern American poetry<sup>1</sup> M René Taupin has shown the Imagist debt to the Symbolists and the essential differences between the two movements The Symbolists tried to express the interplay of emotion and association, which cannot be described in ordinary discursive speech, by images of an incredible delicacy Mallarmé expounded his aim as being “to evoke an object in deliberate shadow, without ever actually mentioning it, by allusive words, never by direct words” (*Divagations*) They made the most refined use of analogy, suggesting complex emotion by an accumulation of direct images, each maybe by only one element bearing on the central idea, yet, by its interaction with other images, evoking the final synthesis Compared with them the Imagists were unsubtle in aim and technique Direct, shadowless, concrete, they made less of the overtones of language Yet they owed much to individual Symbolists

The Imagist theory of rhythm arose naturally from the desire for clear expression “If Ezra Pound proved its most able practitioner, Flint and Amy Lowell were its best theorists. Using Flint’s term “unrhymed cadence” for *vers libre*, Amy Lowell declared that her poems were “built upon ‘organic rhythm,’ on the rhythm of the speaking

<sup>1</sup> *L’Influence du Symbolisme Français dans la Poésie Américaine, 1910-1920*

voice with its necessity for breathing rather than upon a strict metrical system. They differ from ordinary prose rhythms by being more curved, and containing more stress. Merely chopping prose lines into lengths does not produce cadence, it is constructed upon mathematical and absolute laws of balance and time." (*Sword-Blades and Poppy-Seed*)

Several influences stimulated this rebellion against traditional verse forms. Walt Whitman's free verse acted as a liberating influence, although Miss Lowell asserted that he "never had the slightest idea of what cadence is." In England Henley had attracted attention by "those unrhyming rhythms in which I had tried to quintessentialize, as (I believe) one scarce can do in rhyme." When, however, we inquire further into the nature of "cadence," we find that the most potent influence was French. In *Contemporary American Poetry*, Miss Lowell wrote that within the larger unit of the strophe, "these cadences are made up of time-units which are in no sense syllabic. I mean that the number of syllables to each unit is immaterial. The words must be hurried or delayed in reading to fill out the swing. Some of the cadences are made up of two such units, some of three." Experiment showed that the time-units were roughly of the same duration. The theory of them she took from Robert de Souza, while the general idea of "cadence" came to Flint from G Kahn's *Du Rhythme français*. The reference (above) to the regulation of cadence by breathing suggests a

knowledge of Gheon's theory of analytic strophe More influential was Vildrac and Duhamel's theory according to which each stanza or strophe must contain one or two "rhythmic constants," recurring units, marking the measure In older poetry the constant was the iamb, anapæst, or regular accentual foot In the new poetry it would be an arbitrary unit determined by the poet's instinct and the movement of the strophe "The *vers libre* poem as a whole keeps to a single recurring psychological beat" (*Dial*, 17th January 1918)

The *Odelettes* of de Régnier and de Gourmont's *Litanies de la Rose* had a considerable vogue , but many of the devices exploited by the Imagists came ultimately from the Bible . Among the common methods of obtaining poetic pattern were various forms of parallelism between clauses and strophes These included repetition of word-order, as in .

Tree you are,  
Moss you are,  
You are violets with wind above them,  
A child—so high—you are (E Pound )

Variety was obtained by inversion, as in the third line Sometimes parallelism occurred in couplet figures, sometimes in triplets These lines give both uses

long, long before we came to earth  
long, long before we rent our hearts  
with this worship, this fear  
and this dread

The strains might be longer than one line

Lilies in dooryards

Holding conversations with an early moon—

a figure reiterated by Miss Lowell in her *Lilies*

Antiphonal effects were frequent

Thy maidens are white like pebbles ,

Their music about thee (E Pound )

Assonance and alliteration contributed to the word-music , rhyme was occasionally used as an added grace.

Pound's *The Rest* is a good example of careful structure first an invocatory couplet, then two parallel triplets, followed by two quatrains, each composed of two parallel two-line strains , and lastly, a coda with a balanced couplet

We must distinguish between the studied craftsmanship of the Imagists and the flood of base imitation which brought *vers libre* into disrepute before its principles were widely appreciated ✓ Their practice proved the possibility of a free verse as formal in its own way as the traditional metres , and, largely owing to their experiments, free verse became popular during and immediately after the 1914 war . But its extreme difficulty proved too much for most writers, who misused it as an easy way of expressing irregular and half-digested ideas , and with the return of some attempt at imaginative stability came a return to older manners This should not be allowed to obscure the Imagist achievement, which left its mark on the metrical patterns as well as on the tone and imagery of most

later poets According to Mr Glen Hughes, the movement "legitimised free verse, cleared the air of musty artifice and shallow sentiment, revived the clarity and conciseness of the Greeks, substituted classical objectivity for romantic cosmicism, demonstrated the effectiveness of the Oriental miniature, and accomplished a re-wedding of the intellect and the emotions" This is exaggerated praise, as we can see by examining three typical Imagist poets (I choose H D, Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound as being the most influential), yet there is a measure of truth in the contention Imagism, however, with its narrow creed, could not embody complex moods left by war, but if its most important poets gradually changed their technique, they preserved their clear vision and their contempt for the expository

The early translations of H D from Euripides were much praised Almost all her work was a striving after the Greek spirit—its sensuousness and mythopœic faculty, its ardent emotion and formal restraint Her first volume, *Sea-Garden* (1916) was full of the colours and forms of nature :

amber husk  
fluted with gold,  
fruit on the sand  
marked with a rich green (*Sea Poppies*)

No other modern poet had so well suggested sheerly physical sensation (*Heat*, *Mid-Day*), but passion rarely entered this exquisite culture of sense-impressions In *Hymen* (1921) the figures still emerged pale as statues in a garden, as in

*Circe*, where the yearning of the goddess is less memorable than

Panther and panther  
then a black leopard  
follows close—  
black panther and red  
and a great hound,  
a god-like beast  
cut the sand in a clear ring,  
and shut me from the earth

Hellenism was a way of escape from the present, the external world of Mediterranean exoticism, pagan rites and pastoral gestures, was a fantastic "compensation". More firmly than most of her fellows she clung to the purely physical image, for instance in *Heliodora* (1924), under the influence of Sappho and the Greek Anthology. In *Red Roses for Bronze* (1931) she admitted a complexity of emotion related to a modern state of mind, and the diffuse *The Walls do not fall* (1944) was an attempt to show the situation of the artist in wartime with a wealth of symbolism from Egyptian mythology. But she was not very successful in modern and social themes, and on the whole her work warrants the epitaph she herself wrote

Greek flower, Greek ecstasy  
reclaims for ever  
One who died  
following  
intricate songs' lost measure

Richard Aldington, too, began as a student of the classics, with a fondness for Landor's *Hellenics*

and the metrical experiments of Southey and Henley Other early influences were de Régnier and de Gourmont Less accomplished than H D he had from the first a wider range and a greater energy of expression. His exuberance and laxity were restrained only temporarily under the strict Imagist discipline, and even in *Images* (1910-15) he added a reflective quality to his Greek friezes His invocation to death in *Choricos* is one of the loveliest things in modern poetry For H D's delicate palette he substituted vivid contrast and motion He was not content with the ancient world and the timeless game of natural similitudes , his escape was not entire , the modern world intruded, until sometimes his dreams became themselves an intrusion into the sordid present (e g *Interlude*) He was the typical disillusioned romantic, turning from humanity and himself with disgust (*In the Tube*, *Cinema Exit*) Such misanthropy is a common phase among contemporary poets who have not the Georgian power of imaginative evasion He found it difficult in the army to gather " Some intuition of the unalterable gods," and in vain among the trench rats he tried

Making for myself *hokku*

Of the moon and flowers and of the snow

He could not apply the Imagist technique successfully to a harsh realism complicated by intellectual questioning Both *Images of War* and *Images of Desire* (1919) showed the disintegration of the cadence Only occasionally, as in *Odelette*, does the strophe

regain the old ebb and flow. Perhaps a consciousness of this failure in music now drove him to write in more traditional forms, especially in a slow irregular blank verse that fitted the sombre reflections of *Exile* (1923). Conscious that he had lost poetic power in seeking truth, he resolved to abandon solemnity.

Come happy falsehood,  
Once again,  
Make me a happy fool (*Truth*)

*A Fool i' the Forest* (1925) was the fruit of this determination. In a "Phantasmagoria," owing much to Mr Pound and Mr Eliot as well as to the Symbolists, Aldington represented the inner conflict which had thwarted him since his old Imagist days—the struggle between his desire for harmony and two irreconcilable elements of his personality, his "imaginative faculties," symbolised by Mezzetin, the clown from the *Commedia dell' Arte*, and his "intellectual faculties," symbolised by the Conjuror Crude though it is in its transitions, its wit and irony, its literary allusiveness modelled too obviously on other men's styles, the poem is an interesting attempt to solve the problem of the long poem. Though the technique is fantastic, the approach is broadly autobiographical, describing the poet's Greek proclivities (as a trip to the Parthenon), his experience in the War, and his fear as to what he might now become. It is an acute diagnosis of the "strange disease of modern life." Later poems reveal the spiritual dichotomy of intellect and imagination, for he writes in two styles. At

times in *Passages Toward a Long Poem* he achieves lyrical intensity *The Eaten Heart* on the other hand reviews contemporary society in an abstract manner largely derived from Mr Pound—and D H Lawrence.

Now, under the reign of Mr Bloom,  
When the strange machines have killed the old Europe,

he broods on the “hard unhappy faces,” and considers that in spite of everything

I think we were right to go groping in all forbidden places,  
Uncovering horrors politely forgotten  
And facing them too,  
Making ourselves hard for the hard age of machines  
I like the men and women of my age,  
I like their hardness,  
For though we are a battered and rather bitter set,  
Still we have faced the facts, we have been pretty honest

Intellectual hardness has thwarted imaginative harmony Mezzetin and the Conjuror battled to the end in the art of Richard Aldington and many others

The development of Ezra Pound was more complex in so far as he underwent more diverse influences, more simple in that he remained throughout an æsthete though civilisation fell Pound, with all his faults, was not a mere dilettante ✓ As Mr Eliot points out, although his career was marked by a variety of allegiances, he surrendered himself wholly to none of them, but came away with tribute, his true overlord being always a poetry “as hard as marble” Behind his eccentricities, his desire to

shock the *bourgeoisie*, the occasionally vulgar arrogance of his polemics, there was a fanatical integrity in experiment

His true Penelope  
Was Flaubert (*Mauberley*)

His study of Arthur Symons and his edition of Lionel Johnson show that he knew himself the heir of the nineties. The shades of Morris, Yeats and even of Dowson flit about his *Personæ* (1909) and other early poems. More potent and lasting, however, was the love of Browning, expressed with whimsical ruggedness in *Mesmerism*, and he carried on the tradition of vigorous movement, strong idiom, and passion for the robuster sides of the Middle Ages and Renaissance by his studies in French, Provençal and Italian. Hence the dramatic lyrics *Marvoil* and *Pierre Vidal Old*, the *Villonaud*, the translations from Bertrand de Born and Charles D'Orléans. From such sources came the freely running rhythms and the practice in forms of the utmost formality (Sestina, Ballade, etc.), which early marked him as a dexterous metrist. His re-creation of the Old English *Seafarer* in alliterative-accentual verse modelled on the original measure was a notable achievement of great influence on later poets.

Bitter breast-cares have I abided,  
Known on my keel many a care's hold,  
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent  
Narrow night-watch nigh the ship's head  
While she tossed close to cliffs Coldly afflicted,  
My feet were by frost benumbed

Such accentual experiments and the adaptation of classical quantities to stresses in *Apparuit* prepared for the assimilation of Imagist cadence under the influence of de Régnier (e.g. *A Girl*), and his London friends (e.g. *N.Y.*)

Imagism strengthened Pound's love for the precise, the concrete, "wiry bounding lines." But it is noticeable that, unlike H.D., he did not over-emphasise the purely visual quality of images. The magnificent reserve of *Δώρια*, the skilful characterisation in *Portrait d'une Femme* (afterwards remembered by Mr Eliot), the variety of his moods, early distinguish him from the others of the group. He was justified in his complaint to his muse in *Lustra* (1916) that "A lot of asses praise you because you are virile," for his peculiar power consisted in a union of delicacy with vitality, in the combination of a full, clear syntax, a swift and mordant presentation, with a hatred of rhetoric and a subtlety of mood derived from the Symbolists. *Lustra* introduced a modern note.

Here they stand without quaint devices,  
Here they are with nothing archaic about them

But although he announced a social programme, his stock of ideas was mainly æsthetic, his animosity directed mainly against Philistines. He wrote epigrams on persons, echoing classical triviality as well as classical downrightness. More successful are the indirect suggestions of personality based on Imagist technique (e.g. *Albatre*, *Gentildonna*). But the pageantry, the intimacy, the perfect delineation

of Chinese poetry saved him, during the 1914 war, from total descent into badinage and satire. During the same period he drew more and more from Corbière and Tailhade without losing touch with his old loves.

Through the cheap and brittle wit of *Mœurs Contemporaines* we can perceive an aspiration towards a dry casualness, a lowering of tone in an almost contemptuous detachment, which justified itself finally in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). Here the translator, the painter of images and portraits, the eclectic cosmopolitan, attained what was lacking in his previous work, a sustained conception; he achieved it, as Richard Aldington attempted later to do, by autobiographical reflection. The whole volume, and not only the title-poem, discussed the poet's relationship to his age, it is a melancholy stocktaking, the expression of a personality and of a narrow artistic ideal.

Starting from his conception of himself as the Flaubertian engraver, Pound showed how even love was implicated in this "fundamental passion," since the desire

to designate  
His new-found orchid

could only be achieved in retrospect, after estrangement and "the supervening blankness." In *E P Ode pour l'élection de son Sépulchre* he criticised his early aim

to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry, to maintain "the sublime"  
In the old sense Wrong from the start

He attacked the age which  
                         demanded an image  
                         Of its accelerated grimace

and regretted bitterly that

The pianola "replaces"  
Sappho's barbitos

But whereas Aldington became at times sceptical of Attic grace, and participated in the modern struggle, Pound in *Mauberley* recognised that he was unfit "for this agility," since his imagination did not associate art with ethics or metaphysics, and the beauty of external objects

Brought no reforming sense  
To his perception  
Of the social inconsequence

In him the concrete answered to the concrete, amid the social turmoil he clung to "the manifest universe," perceived "a Minoan undulation" of sensuous patterns, until he ceased to care about even their representation in art. His poetry became confessional and embittered, and he himself finally "drifted an hedonist"

The poem, however, is valuable because Pound was not only a hedonist but a sardonic observer of himself and the times who, in the effort to be confessional and yet objective, struck out a new method. He had admired in Rimbaud an economy that had ever been his own aim. ✓ He now took over some of Laforgue's devices, such as the use of cosmic imagery, far-brought allusions, references to the classics and quotations from other poems, as well

as the ironic use of journalistic clichés, all to give density of background with the minimum of words. The first three of these tricks were common to the English Metaphysicals, just becoming fashionable. It is noticeable, too, that this poet who had originally preached the sensuousness of imagery, now wrote in a deliberately abstract manner. This was not just an imitation of Laforgue's pedantic mannerism. A pseudo-scientific terminology was the essential vehicle of that ironic depreciation with which Ezra Pound regarded his little tragi-comedy of the pharisaic artist exiled in a world where *To AGATHON* must be sought with the "sieve" and the "seismograph," and where the joyous clash of physical forms is "replaced" by the jargon of psychology and social theory.

The historical importance of this volume is considerable. How many younger poets have seized on its elliptical expressions and substituted for their witty conciseness an unintelligible inconsequence! How many have imitated its pedantry without its irony, and applied the method appropriate to one complex mood to eke out inexperience or bald didacticism! *Mauberley* itself was a substantial achievement—not only "a document of an epoch" genuine tragedy and comedy, and

in the best sense of Arnold's worn phrase, a "criticism of life,"<sup>1</sup> but a harmonious unity with its sequence of interrelated parts and its mingling of "apparent roughness and *naveté*" in a movement formed to suggest the harshness and the lingering

<sup>1</sup> T S Eliot, Introduction to *Selected Poems* of E Pound

bathos of existence. If *vers libre* was the form most suited to the restlessness and revolt of the war years, these short stanzas—recalling and then rejecting Gautier—based on hard accents, feminine endings, overflow, irregular rhymes, assonance and alliteration—suggest the impatience with a purely formal beauty and the unsatisfied desire for order, of the post-war years. Pound's technical dexterity was such that his verse tightened its control of thought in these circumstances, making a new music of strong contrast and half-resolved dissonances. This controlled freedom, with his hard clarity, was his peculiar gift to modern poetry.

In *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1934) Pound produced what might at first seem a bad jumbled translation from the Elegies. The first four poems mingle passages from Book 3 and the other eight draw mainly on Book 2. But it was really a re-writing of the Latin amorist in terms of the brittle post-war spirit. Pound was drawn by the kindred brevity, allusiveness, and bitterness of Propertius, by his preoccupation with poetry and fame. Pressing home the identification, he saw in him, as Mr Eliot explains, "an element of humour, of irony and mockery" unperceived by other critics. His version at times gives the glow and poignancy of the original, but the humour introduced is less like Roman humour than like that of the Yankee at the Court of King Arthur. Pound has something of Mark Twain's hero in him, while treating Ancient Rome as though it were Europe of the nineteen-twenties, he mocks at academic scholarship.

(of his pamphlets on reading), takes liberties with his author (whose modesty he makes arrogance), mistranslates (wilfully, one hopes), and turns, for instance,

Carminis interea nostri redeamus in orbem,  
gaudent in solito tacta puella sono

into

And in the meantime my songs will travel  
And the devirginated young ladies will enjoy them  
when they have got over the strangeness

(*Cf.* Phillimore's less piquant version "Let us meanwhile re-enter upon the circle of my song, and let my girl be moved and take pleasure in the familiar strain") Here he uses *tacta puella* as the opposite of *virgo intacta* and introduces ideas quite alien to Propertius

The past for Ezra Pound was just a vehicle for his own personality, with its visual intensity, violent prejudices, and "Douglasite" economics Out of this came his serial epic the *Cantos* (some seventy of which had been published before the last war

*Mauberley* was autobiographical, summary, and abstract The *Cantos*, however, have no such chain of implied narrative sequence Perhaps they may best be described with reference to the æsthetic of Mallarmé

"The pure work," wrote Mallarmé,<sup>1</sup> "implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields place to the words, immobilised by the shock of their inequality, they take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious

<sup>1</sup> A Symons, *Studies in Two Literatures*, p. 184

stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase," and declared ' that we are now precisely at the moment of seeking an art which shall complete the transposition, into the Book, of the symphony, or which shall simply recapture our own for it is

in the intellectual word at its utmost, that, fully and evidently, we should find, drawing to itself all the correspondences of the universe, the supreme Music "

At first the *Cantos* read like the nightmare of a fevered dilettante of art, history, literature, and comparative religion A magnificent passage, describing in Pound's Old English manner the summoning of Tiresias after Ulysses' departure from Circe, is followed by references to Eleanor, Helen, and an account by Accetes to Pentheus of an adventure on shipboard with Dionysus, then by the flow of sensations and associations passing through the poet's mind as he sat on the Dogana steps at Venice This gives a clue, and gradually out of the medley of sensuous beauty and historical learning emerges an order not logical or chronological, but associational The relationship between the teeming incidents and allusions is one of emotional analogy Thus the picture of

an old man seated  
Speaking in a low drone  
Ityn !  
Et ter flebiliter, Ityn, Ityn !

—the reference being to the death of Itys, whose mother killed him and was changed into a swallow—

is followed by an allusion to the legend of the Eaten Heart "It is Cabestan's heart in the dish," while the story of Actæon recalls another example of transformed and hunted lust, the Vidal of *Marvoil*

Then Actæon Vidal,  
Vidal It is old Vidal speaking,  
          stumbling along in the wood,  
Not a patch, not a lost shimmer of sunlight,  
          the pale hair of the goddess

So it goes on, image evoking image, fragments from one theme mingling with elements from another, until it becomes obvious that the *Cantos* are an attempt to write Mallarmé's poetic symphony of verbal associations, with theme answering to theme, an elaborate succession of interwoven analogies and contrasts from all periods of history and legend—Homer, Sigismundo Malatesta, Kung, Kublai, Dante, Victor Carpathio, Wolfgang Amadeus, Mr Gidding of U S A—and from all parts of the world. It is an "epic of timelessness"<sup>1</sup> And there are as many styles as themes, from the heroic to the prose of letter and placard

The *Cantos* contain moments of striking descriptive, narrative, and dramatic poetry, but they lack any continuous unifying power. The replacement of "the old lyrical afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase" by the "mutual reflection" of images is not enough to unify so complex a sequence. We look beneath the surface play of association for some plastic principle, not

<sup>1</sup> Cf review in *The Hound and Horn*, Winter, 1931

necessarily an idea such as a theory of cycles or occult correspondences, but some coherent view of life, some apprehension binding outer to inner. But it seems that poetic experience to Pound was a series of fragmentary memories of scenes and men and books. For him the world existed purely as imagery. Oscar Wilde wished to write a novel with no more plot than a Persian carpet. Ezra Pound had a similar aim, but as the work progressed it gradually became evident that the work would never have unity, and was indeed a symptom of imaginative disintegration. Pound's pedantry, his "isolated superiority," his scorn for tradition and scholarship had as much influence in the 'twenties as his great technical resource. In the 'thirties the humaner examples of Eliot, Read and Auden swung away from him, and he was left to follow his political and poetic blind alley to the bitter end.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WAR POETRY (1914-18) AND THE RETURN OF SATIRE

OF all the greater kinds of literature, satire has perhaps suffered most from changes in public taste, and some of its most ardent students can still not discuss it without apologies

“ To claim      on their satire (wrote the late Humbert Wolfe<sup>1</sup>), that Dryden and Pope are great poets, is to deny the valid distinction between satire and verse (*sic*)      The satirist uses the form and not the spirit of poetry      His purpose is not like that of the poet’s, to compose, but to challenge    He must strike at what is fleeting, and not seek to elevate it into the unchanging    A great satirist is not great by what he builds, but in what he destroys ”

Surely this is a muddled view    A satirist aims to destroy abuses , that is his ulterior motive    But he may also be an artist , within his bounds he will seek to crystallise that which he attacks, like bees in amber, as an example for all time    Indeed, we must invert Wolfe’s dictum and say, “ A satirist is great, not by what he destroys, but in what he builds ”

Satire, like all other art, creates a world of its own, related through the poet’s mind to the ordinary world, but complete in itself    The true satirist

<sup>1</sup> *History of English Satire* (Hogarth Press )

is a myth-maker. But the satirist's imagination, unlike the ideal dramatist's, is not impartial. He perishes if he suspends judgment. Not for him the impersonality of the serenest art. He imposes himself upon all that he touches, and one of the tokens of his success is the degree to which he communicates his unique apprehension of life and men.

Yet satire is the most deliberately social of the kinds. It implies some sort of collective conscience, and assumes that individuals are responsible for their actions. The satirist must not allow his sympathy to destroy his detached judgment. Justice must come before mercy. By virtue of his office the satirist is lifted above error and eccentricity.

One effect of the Romantic movement in ethics and literature was to render such an attitude difficult, if not impossible. Romanticism began with a democratic bias towards liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty to the romantics was a complete freedom of the individual from precisely those social customs and restrictions which previous Horaces and Popes had inculcated as salutary. In the narrow sense, romanticism was anti-social. Romantic equality came to imply, not equality of income or "opportunity," but a mystical equality of mind and spirit between all men, which obviously spelt the doom of satire. The triumph of individualism meant a justification of eccentricity. And "fraternity," interpreted as a sentimental impulse to toleration and sympathy, also helped to destroy the judicial attitude.

Even science, usually so friendly to the enemies of romance, brought its fallacies to bear in support of sentiment. It seemed for a time as though man were only a delicate machine registering the pressure of his ancestry against the force of circumstance. Responsibility was lost in a wave of determinism. The effect of the growth of this attitude upon what might have been satiric material can be illustrated with reference to Robert Browning. Browning was no behaviourist, his was a gospel of will and action. But consider three of his long poems, *Bishop Blougram*, *Mr Sludge the Medium*, and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. In each he dealt with a contemporary evil. Obviously Browning began by hating them all, and much irony and contempt remain, but as he worked upon them he succumbed to the psychological itch. Ceasing to regard his characters as the enemies of society, he became interested in their tangled motives, sympathy ousted satire, and the result was a series of ambiguous figures, treated in part ironically, in part sentimentally. For a time, after the 1914-18 War, Freudian psychology gave a new lease of life to the literature of irresponsibility. But before Freud became known the Determinist movement had received a set-back. The rise of Socialism and other theories of corporate ownership showed that a new consciousness of collective responsibility was rising out of the ruins of romantic illusion. While Nietzsche was attacking Christianity as a slave-religion because it fostered passivity and sentimentality, Samuel Butler in England was substituting for the

Darwinian hypothesis of the survival of the fittest and variation by chance, the Lamarckian conception of Will Bernard Shaw and the Fabians developed this notion, applying it to the problems of social reform. So responsibility came back into human life, and the field was open for the return of satire. As might be expected, poetry lagged behind prose in the revival, neither the Edwardians nor the Georgians writing much in this vein. J. C. Squire's parodies were usually a subtle form of flattery, Rupert Brooke's boyish moods of disillusion and ennui were insignificant. The Georgians commented on the problems of the age by giving them the cold shoulder or by crying, with Masefield and Galsworthy, "Give us understanding," meaning by that an understanding of the individual's difficulties which would drown criticism in pity.

But the previous chapter should have shown that we cannot attribute to the War of 1914-18 alone the revolt against cosmic wonder and sentimental humanitarianism. The War was a catalysing agent, hastening an inevitable process of division and compounding. Yet it was much more. For the passions aroused by the struggle helped in the general disruption of formal authority, and fostered experiment. Above all, the conflict and the continued turmoil after 1918 produced, not, as some have thought, a loss of social standards, but rather a heightened awareness of social needs, a clash of principles, a struggle for stability, whether by a return to an old order or by the creation of a new

The remainder of this book will be mainly devoted to the consideration of poets greatly influenced by this social ferment, whether they were satirists or not

We have seen that Georgian romanticism took two directions, a fanciful revulsion from the drabness of urban life, and an attempt to transmute the commonplace by impressionism—often of a low emotional tone. Both these tendencies continued during the War.

The sense of a racial tradition, the love of English soil, the humanitarian sympathies, which give dignity to Rupert Brooke's war-poems, also inspired the patriotic verses of John Freeman, W N Hodgson, Herbert Asquith, Julian Grenfell, J E Flecker and Laurence Binyon. Here war exists as the instrument of a romantic ideal. But the horrors of trench warfare gave rise to much excellent work dependent on a typically Georgian evasion of the actual. Thus, in *Home Thoughts in Laventie*, E W Tennant found respite in

Dancing with a measured step from wrecked and  
shattered towns  
Away upon the Downs

Francis Ledwidge, too, had in an unusual degree the power of dissociating himself from his immediate environment. Hence in *After Court Martial* his condemned man regards the present as a mere dream and the world of imagination the only reality

'Tis I the soldier bears the shame,  
Not I the king in Babylon

Because the distinction was so inherent, Ledwidge's *Last Poems* dealt mainly with nature, the fairies, and the dead kings of Ireland. Other poets of the Georgian tradition found poetic material in the squalors in which they lived, describing incidents of warfare, the ardours or pathos of simple men caught in the catastrophe. Much of Mr W Gibson's war-verse belonged to this category. Robert Nichols used both methods. *The Assault* was an ambitious attempt at presenting the sensations and emotions of an officer before and during an attack. Descriptive and impressionistic in method, crude in rhythm, it failed, like most others of its class, to arouse the emotions it invoked.

Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, alone of the soldier poets, reached their full stature during the War. Mr Sassoon's first poems were essentially Georgian—with their natural lyricism, their love of children, of “old English songs,” of pastoral dryads and fauns. Naturally enough in wartime too, “among a blaze of lights” he used to think

of garden nights  
And elm trees nodding at the stars,

and to seize on any moment of elation afforded by memory or music. But his predominant mood was not lyrical but satiric, not “escapist” but rebellious, for he came to look on his comrades as victims of stay-at-home cant, sacrifices to a false idealism. Though at times the soldier appeared

transfigured, a Christ in suffering (*The Redeemer*), he saw him for the most part more simply as

a decent chap  
Who did his work and hadn't much to say,  
(*A Working Party*)

and chose incidents revealing the dogged endurance of men feeding their lives patiently to a machine (e.g. *Wirers*)

Sassoon turned in disgust from the "dying heroes and their deathless deeds" to *Suicide in Trenches*, remorse after killing, "unmanly" collapses, physical horrors He excelled in the terse colloquial anecdote

"Good morning! good morning!" the General said,  
When we met him last week on our way to the Line

"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack  
But he did for them both by his plan of attack (*The General*)

Worse than military blunders, however, were the crass ignorance of civilians, the belief "That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace," that the wounded were "longing to go out again," that all was well with uncomplaining heroes In *Song Books of the War* he foresaw the oblivion that falls on the public mind, and the return of the romantic view of war against which he was striving"

Such pieces are too acid for the popular anthologists, who prefer the radiant *Everyone Sang* Yet they are Sassoon's gift to modern poetry , they reveal the Georgian turning from the lyrical

moment to the socially significant, shedding his romance under the compulsion of disillusionment and sympathy, freeing himself from rhetoric, and achieving, by forthright rhythms, a new, often epigrammatic, pungency

Between the wars, Sassoon continued to batter the façades of shallow complacency. His technique changed little. Occasionally a tedious mock-pedantry and an excessive alliteration went hand in hand with peevishness. The best of these later poems are those in which a light Byronic influence is uppermost, for instance, *Lines Written in Anticipation of a London Paper attaining a Guaranteed Circulation of Ten Million Daily*, in which with apparently casual wit he traces the history of the press-peer, comments on the News Value of the Bible, and congratulates all those whose activities have led to an expansion of circulation —

I must congratulate the Winning Horse ,  
 The Coin that lost the Test Match , the huge Fist  
 Of the sub-human Champion Pugilist ,  
 The simpering Siren in the Bart's Divorce ,  
 The well-connected Poisoner, tensely tried ,  
 And the well-famed Bassoonist who has died

Sassoon's poetic development stopped here, his friend Wilfred Owen's, although cut short by death, went further. Owen was a disciple of Keats who, in 1913, as a tutor in Bordeaux, became personally acquainted with Laurent Tailhade and was led to metrical experiment and a poetry of emotional suggestion. Mr Blunden goes so far as to call him "at moments, an English

Verlaine" His early sonnets show an excess of epithet and reiteration and a supremacy of verbal music over thought Pieces such as *The Unreturning, Music, To Eros*, betray the lingering echoes of the nineties He came to feel the immaturity of such moods, and soon after his first experiences in France in 1917, and stimulated by his friendship with Sassoon, he wrote "efforts in Sassoon's manner" among which we may place *The Parable of the Old and Young, The Dead Beat, The Chances, SIW Disabled*, and *Dulce et Decorum* Though he declared, " am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience ? " he was not so successful as his friend in poems of mordant bitterness But he had to go through this phase in order to reach another He had been in danger of loving mere words overmuch, so it was well that he should be made capable of writing in his draft Preface to the volume which he hoped to publish

" Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry My subject is War, and the poetry of War The Poetry is in the Pity All a Poet can do to-day is to warn That is why the true Poets must be truthful "

It was truth, and a harsh way of expressing it, which he found in Sassoon In a few months he passed from " æsthetic " adolescence to maturity Because he never lost faith in men, his moods of disillusioned irony were less cruel than Sassoon's. His speculations struck deeper than the military or the social system (*Futility*) Nevertheless, he did not altogether lose his hope for man (*The Next War*),

and he could rejoice in the exultation of battle as well as in the fellowship of comrades. But the predominant note is one of acceptance. There is no bitterness in his picture of England's indifference to "Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms" (*The Kind Ghosts*). *Miners* reflects calmly upon the inevitable oblivion that must settle on those who were digging the future with their agonies. For he passed out of satire into elegy, considering at last the universal burden of grief more than immediate ugliness.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Sassoon's pity turned to indignation, his rose more naturally to the beauty of reconciliation (*Anthem for Doomed Youth*). In *Strange Meeting* he reached the fullness of his imaginative stature by a Dantesque vision of the dead in which he described the war-poet's function to rebuke

the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled  
Now men will go content with what we spoiled  
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled  
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress

### The lines

I am the enemy you killed, my friend  
Let us sleep now

reveal his final mastery of life as well as of poetry.<sup>12</sup>

Wilfred Owen's contribution to verse technique was considerable. From the first he experimented in a kind of half-rhyme illustrated above. Sometimes

it is mere consonance, with entirely dissimilar vowel-sounds, more usually it consists in impure rhyme, the studied difference of vowels having an effect of muted bells Owen did not use *vers libre*, but for the most part the five-stressed line with an iambic basis freely patterned Against the prevalent Georgian laxity in this form he set a cumulative use of balance and parallelism

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile, I knew we stood in Hell ”

It was Owen's privilege to bring a new dignity to war-poetry and to familiar measures considered by many to be outworn

As we have already remarked of Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound, the Imagists too were affected by the War, during which they outgrew their original theories Herbert Read's *Naked Warriors* will be treated in a later chapter Other poets less strict than he followed Aldington in using *vers libre* as a loose cloak for almost prosaic comments But the wartime disintegration of the “cadence” largely caused the post-war return to traditional rhythms Both tendencies may be traced in the work of Sir Osbert Sitwell When he used free verse he fell into formlessness , the best of his wartime satires were written in regular metres under the influence of Sassoon, and directed against profiteers, armchair warriors, religious jingoists The coming of peace found him ironical amid the cheering, looking forward to another war when “Heroes became bores” Perceiving that

the world was no better than before—the money-changers still in the Temple

(Railway shares must go up,  
Wages must go down  
And we will manufacture battleships),

the Philistines still raging to kill “Cubism, Futurism and Vers-libre,” he continued to skirmish against the social circles that he knew best

Ever an eclectic, drawing on current fashions, he turned away now from the manner of Sassoon to preach the gospel of T E Hulme

Let us prune the tree of language  
Of its dead fruit  
Let us curb this eternal humour  
And become witty

*(How shall we rise to greet the Dawn?)*

Wit was noticeably absent from Osbert Sitwell's earlier satires, from 1919 onwards, however, a new intellectual intensity entered his work. At first his irony remained heavy as when he hailed the return of the social climbers to their pre-war activities (*War-Horses*). With an enthusiasm worthy of a larger game he pursued these aristocratic pretenders and their parasites. Meanwhile he was developing, with his sister Edith and his brother Sacheverell, the rococo imagery that was a feature of their côteerie (cf Chapter Six). To this and to the influence of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot we may attribute the remarkable change of manner apparent in the best of these satires. He now alternated generalisation with the invention of typical characters. His studies of Mrs Freudenthal

and of Mrs Kinfoot—some in *vers libre*, the best in rhyming quatrains of four-stressed lines—show a great advance in accuracy and economy.

In another series he turned his attention to the middle class and the peculiar limitations, as he thought them, of the conventional Anglican view of life. His most original satires are those in which the treatment of imagery is determined by a predominant emotion, as in *English Gothic*, where the description of a cathedral, outside which “Stone bishops scale a stone façade,” is made to suggest the petrifaction of belief and habit among the worshippers. In *Anglican Hymn in Foreign Parts* he parodied *Through Greenland's Icy Mountains* in a style adapted to the English view of the world as a mechanical plaything invented for English enjoyment—a world in which birds sing “clockwork songs of calf-love” while

The ocean at a toy shore  
Yaps like a Pekinese

—a “clever” assimilation of external description into the attitude criticised

Sir Osbert Sitwell has significance in the history of satire for still another experiment, he was one of the leaders in the revival of the heroic couplet. For almost a century the reputation of Dryden and Pope had been at a low ebb. When the war broke through the romantic code the first experiments in satire were closer to the Elizabethan epigram or to Byron than to Dryden and Pope. Gilbert Cannan's *Noel*, with its attack on

Liberal-Imperialism, has a Byronic review of pre-war society in ottava-rima

As the revolt against romanticism spread, however, Dryden and Pope came into their own and they were seen to be admirably capable of adaptation to modern needs C R Cammell's rhetorical poems against war (1914-18) and modern art (1919) deserve mention as early symptoms of the revival His dialogue *Satire against the Cruelties Perpetrated on Animals by Scientific Impostors* (1928) was an avowed imitation of Pope

Literary squabbles, suppressed by the war, broke out with the return of peace Osbert Sitwell's *The Jolly Old Squire, or Way Down in Georgia* (1922) was a noteworthy attack on the romantic school, and particularly on the poets of the *London Mercury* His target was the sentimental rusticity of the Georgians, and the "kind of hollow, hallowed emptiness" to which in his opinion these poets aspired A slender thread of story, telling how Satan substituted in the "Hermes" a poem by Sqxxre for one by Shxxks, and one of Shelley's for that of Sqxxre, was introduced to suggest the common likeness of the Georgians, and their dependence on the romantic tradition Structurally, however, the poem is weak , its success lies in occasional epigrammatic flashes

The most pertinacious satirist of the Georgian muse was the South African poet Mr Roy Campbell, whose earlier poems, *The Flaming Terrapin* and *Adamastor*, were allegories of creative vigour marked by a colourful description and loose handling which

recalls Kipling's Good Workmen in Heaven  
 "They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with  
 brushes of comets' hair" It was (in Campbell's  
 own phrase)

As if a phoenix, moulting plume from plume,  
 Sprinkling his fading splendours on the gloom,  
 Zigzags of scarlet, combs of silver flame,  
 Shivering on the darkness, went and came,  
 And fifty hues, in fierce collision hurled,  
 Blazed on the hushed amazement of the world !

(*The Flaming Terrapin*, Pt II )

Impatient with the spruce poets who "with pale fingers wind The bays in garlands for their northern kind," he changed "This too-frequented Hippocrene for one That thunders flashing to my native sun," and wrote with a sultry violence at times magnificent *The Georgiad* applied this vehemence in satire against the "bookish Muses" of literary London with a long-winded fury nearer to Churchill than to Pope. His satire struck deeper than Sitwell's, for he attacked not only the Georgian manner but the liberal-socialistic attitudes he saw behind it, hence his onslaught on the "Shaws and Russells" of the age. Later his love of action and his hatred of the "Left" took him into the rebel army in Spain and produced a colourful but turgid poem, *Flowering Rifle*. The World War saw him in battle again. He explains

my steel  
 Is always pointed at the tyrant's heel,  
 Whether from Right or Left he dares to clout  
 His Maker's image with a butcher's clout

And he has a condottiere's hatred of the Left-wing civilian poets to whom he ascribes bad motives in war and peace His polemics in *Talking Bronco* (1946) are as savage and amusing as ever and entirely lacking in detachment He is true to his early love, the heroic couplet

Free verse and prose are slippers for the dons  
 Unfit to clang this marching age of bronze  
 The true vernacular a thorax throws  
 And leads the rhyme and metre by the nose ,  
 And when it finds some wild romantic dream  
 Has broken loose, with tousled hair astream,  
 It's easy to collect it on one's pen  
 As passing troops collect a wayside hen  
 So you can back the couplet every time,  
 With its ten fingers twirling thumbs of rhyme,  
 To seize and clamp the trailing thoughts they fray  
 And scatter like tobacco by the way,  
 And in iambics fold them, neatly set,  
 As nimble fingers scroll a cigarette      (*Talking Bronco*)

" Some wild romantic dream," " trailing thoughts scatter like tobacco by the way " , these are not to be clamped in Roy Campbell's loose, defiant verses He is best when most under control, in the descriptive strophes of *The Flaming Terrapin*, Part V, in the humorous pieces of *Talking Bronco*, and above all in the lyrical descriptions, *The Zulu Girl*, *The Zebras*, *The Serf*, where his love of life is not embittered by hatred

There were many other attempts at the satiric couplet between the wars Humbert Wolfe's *News of the Devil* (1926) wielded loose run-on couplets in a shrewd if diffuse satire on the Press which at

times had something of Samuel Butler's wit and fluency In *An Epistle*, Julian Bell (who fell in Spain) presumed

with Dryden's couplet to engage  
The wild philosophers in all their rage

In *Arms and the Man* he ridiculed the European situation in which

nations grew secure, with endless bother,  
By each being twice as strong as every other,

and, remembering Goldsmith, portrayed an England ravaged by poverty Edgell Rickword modernised Donne in *Twittingpan*, Alan Porter scourged "the Publicising Parson" in *The Dean* Of these writers Julian Bell was the most lucid and effective, but they all achieved some degree of success by close fidelity to a model<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, classical verse satire to-day, though significant of a general change in poetic direction, smacks too much of the *pastiche* to be hailed as a primary achievement The most considerable modern poem containing satiric elements is undoubtedly T S Eliot's *Waste Land* But it is so much more than a satire that it must be left for another chapter, and its influence has been to foster a poetry as complex as itself In this, satire once more attains its old *satura* form, as a mingling of diverse strains under the compulsion of a dominant idea or sentiment

Among these strains is an element of "Character"-writing in which a general diagnosis of

<sup>1</sup> Cf Sherard Vines's anthology, *Whips and Scorpions*

social ills is illustrated by the portraits of typical individuals, either at length (as in Auden's "Watch any day his nonchalant pauses ") or in a line or two, as in the same author's

Financier, leaving your little room  
Where the money is made but not spent,  
You'll need your typist and your boy no more ,  
The game is up for you and for the others,  
Who, thinking, pace in slippers on the lawns  
Of College Quad or Cathedral Close,  
Who are born nurses, who live in shorts  
Sleeping with people and playing fives (*Poems, XXIX*)

Other examples will be referred to later, for in its negative aspect the Left-wing literary movement was of course satiric. Its mood, however, was rarely so personal as Roy Campbell's, nor so delightfully irresponsible as William Plomer's in *The Dorking Thigh* (1945), a collection of fantastic grotesques "concerned with points in human experience at which the terrifying coincides with the absurd, the monstrous with the commonplace". As was said earlier, satire of attack cannot flourish together with toleration and sympathy, and the Auden school, holding that the exploiter was as much the victim of the system as the exploited, and that aberrations of behaviour were also due to psychological forces outside men's control, were clinicians rather than judges. Ours is not a great period of formal satire, and the grace and polish of Mr G Rostrevor Hamilton's epigrams recall an elegance and stability as yet difficult to achieve.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE SITWELL GROUP

To take refuge in the bosom of nature or in a religion of the Word, to kick against the pricks that goaded them on to death, were not the only possible reactions for imaginations shocked by the War of 1914-18 and after the Georgian and Imagist anthologies came a third series of group-verses illustrative of the variety of poetic solutions to the problems of the day

*Wheels*, which appeared annually from 1916 to 1921, published a very miscellaneous array of pieces—including Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting* and other of his best things Nevertheless many of its contributors shared characteristics under the influence of Edith Sitwell, who dominated, at least for a time, not only her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, but Nancy Cunard, Arnold James, Iris Tree, Helen Rootham, Sherard Vines, and Alan Porter—several of whom later developed along different lines

Nancy Cunard, in the poem which gave the title, expressed their common view of life —

A sometimes think that all our thoughts are wheels  
Rolling forever through the painted world,  
Moved by the cunning of a thousand clowns,  
Dressed paper-wise, with blatant rounded masks

These poets, like the Georgians, hated the city ,

but nature to them was no certain cure, for their revulsion was against life itself, its motiveless malignity and the perpetual imminence of death

Such macabre poems as Iris Tree's address to the grave-worm

Mouth of the dust I kiss, corruption absolute,  
Worm that shall come at last to be my paramour

were symptoms of an intellectual disease which was to afflict poetry for the next twenty years. For *Wheels* showed during 1914-18 the rise of that scepticism, that cynical questioning of illusions, which we usually regard as the peculiar mood of the years between the wars.

It is significant that the second number of *Wheels* (1917) contained some of the early verse of Aldous Huxley, pieces permeated by a typical world-weariness, an irony which played impartially over the mysteries of religion and the mysteries of the digestive organs, an introspective wit playing upon his own foibles as well as other people's in a shoulder-shrugging recognition of an all - too - common humanity (*Social Amenities*). Mr Huxley deliberately embarked upon a poetry of disgust, as in his *Betrothal of Priapus*, describing a glutton making casual love, and in *Frascati's*

What songs? What gongs? What nameless rites?

What blasts of Bantu melody?  
Ragtime—But when the wearied band  
Swoons to a waltz, I take her hand  
And there we sit in blissful calm,  
Quietly sweating, palm to palm.

This is a genius of deflation, a disillusioned puritan in a grotesque mask of mockery Nature is no help, a blind vital force Seeing law without direction he is filled with wonder at the permutations of sex, the strange devices of survival, the prolific callousness of the cosmos (*Topiary*) Mr Huxley's attitude—that of an observer aspiring in vain to a lofty detachment—became prevalent after the War His desire to find patterns in life (in mythologies or in pathological states of mind) led him to write such studies in cruelty as *Caligula* and *Nero and Sporus*, to translate the homosexual *Femmes Damnées* of Baudelaire The limited optimism of *The Cicadas* was a later development

The sources of much of the poetry in *Wheels* may be sought in art rather than in life Helen Rootham's three prose poems from Rimbaud (1916) were instances of French literary influence obvious elsewhere in borrowings from Baudelaire and Verlaine Contemporary painting inspired the Degas-like décor of the stage pieces by Mr Aldous Huxley and the Sitwells, and Cubist effects to be illustrated later *Ut pictura poesis* But the work of the Sitwells must be set against a background of spiritual despair Apart from the satires of Sir Osbert Sitwell, the poetry of all three reveals a shrinking from the external world, and the substitution of an artistic world of fancy, the original creator of which seems to have been Edith The Sitwells imbibed in childhood an intense family tradition and a common stock of memories Bred in the old order, in a social circle the more closely

bound because of its growing unease at the encroachment of an alien life—miners, shopkeepers, villas, slums—Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell (at least) took refuge, when war broke through, in the fantastic manipulation of childhood recollections and warm untroubled images of art. Theirs was indeed a côte-à-côte verse, teeming with half-told tales and family jests. What are “Emily-coloured hands”? and why is a “dog that has a thousand lives” (in *The Sleeping Beauty*) called “Dido Queen of Carthage”? These are trivial instances of a peculiar defect. “The Sitwells,” wrote Arnold Bennett (one of the first to see their talent), “live in a world of perceptions and sensations of their own, extraordinarily, insultingly, different from anybody else’s.” A dilettante strain drew them to the unusual and the neglected, for they were romantic with the romanticism of Beckford, Horace Walpole and the Baroque. The baroque style was a romanticism within the classical age, the compromise between Renaissance Catholicism and Renaissance paganism leading to the triumph of the senses over formal rule. Those flowing lines, elaborate patterns, glowing tints, those swelling draperies, anatomical exaggerations, were an attempt to “surprise by a fine excess,” a psycho-physical hyperbole. Pope’s glass-starred grotto, the French Chinoiseries, the pastorals of Watteau, the painted plaster decorations, showed rococo to be the apotheosis of ornament, a cult of sophisticated surprise and charming eccentricity. It quite naturally preceded the full-blooded romanticism of

the Revolution, because it was itself an *escape*, within the limits of an accepted social order, when an aristocratic code which never questioned its own basic assumptions, made the unusual into a fashion, creating a fairy-tale life to mask its growing ennui. A similarity of imaginative situation led the Sitwells to this store of poetic material while baroque and rococo were still neglected in England.

Miss Sitwell's first poems *Mother*, *Drunkard*, *Duckie*, were Baudelairean in the crude manner of the English nineties. Such experiments showed a natural melancholy "I always was a little outside life," she confessed in *Colonel Fantock*. Sharing the disillusion of her fellows, she did not attempt to diagnose the diseases of civilisation, or to prescribe remedies.

"This modern world is but the thin match-board flooring spread over a shallow hell. For Dante's Hell has faded, is dead. Hell is no vastness, here are no more devils who laugh or who weep—only the maimed dwarfs of this life, terrible, straining mechanisms, crouching in trivial sands, and laughing at the giants' crumbling."<sup>1</sup>

She set this passage at the head of *Façade* (1922). Her poetry, when she admits reflection, is shadowed by a terror of death, a sense of life's futility, a regret for the passing of youth. Unlike Mr Huxley, she sought relief, not in ironic contemplation of the shallow hell below, but by sheer clowning, by fantasy, and by escaping from thought altogether in rhythmical experiments.

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet*, 1920

Undoubtedly she owed something to Laforgue. The reference in *The Sleeping Beauty* to people whose talk is only of the growth of plums is taken from his *Hamlet*. Her *Ass-Face* distinctly recalls the "buveurs de lait d'ânesse" in *Encore à cet Astre*, and there are various resemblances of imagery. But the sentimental self-pity, the irony, the whole technique of Laforgue were alien to her.

Seeing the earth as moving "Beneath a flat and paper sky," she chose to live in a world of her own creation. Her clowns were the clowns of the *Commedia dell' Arte*. They existed in her imagination side by side with Ethiops and Victorian ladies, Greek nymphs and centaurs, wigs and patches, costumes of all ages, statues, fountains, waterfalls, fruits and flowers, unicorns, caves, modern servants and ancient queens, a phantasmagoria without limitation of place or time.

The completeness of her immersion in this eclectic paradise varied of course according to her theme. In *The Little Ghost who Died for Love*, *The Lament of Edward Blastock*, *The Ghost whose Lips were Warm*, she told simple stories of love and death; in *Proserpine* a story of witchcraft was overlaid with incidental ornamentation. Autobiographical reflections and memories formed the stuff of *Troy Park* and *Early Spring*. Her interest was rarely in narrative but in the play of sensations and associations, in trains of brilliant words. So her long poem *The Sleeping Beauty* was merely an excuse for a series of embroideries, like one of those gilded baroque groups in which the general conception is lost in

the press of rival detail And the tone is rococo,  
as though Perrault were illustrated by Beardsley.  
Imagery is all in all —

Like cornucopias with ostrich plumes  
And great gold fruits, the clouds seem from these glooms  
            the point lace on the trees  
And the pearl-berries of the snow upon dark bushes freeze

It is all concrete, however far-brought Like the Imagists, she aimed at precision and directness of effect Unlike them, however, she did not insist that her similitudes should agree in tone Because she was content with the immediate element of likeness, in some of her favourite images such as "ass-hide grass," "sheepskin meadows," "sheepskin waterfall," "bird-breasted leaves," "beard of bass," "dog-furred strawberry-leaves," the search for an accurate transliteration of a sense-impression led at times to odd effects But such images as "the pigeons smelling of gingerbread" and "the stars were like prunes," are not obscure in the least—for the first is a statement of fact which may be checked in any cote, while the second is a witty recollection of the bright sheen on a familiar fruit Her imagery is often belittling Whereas romantic imagery was in the main expansive, the metaphor or simile enriching and prolonging the thought by opening up new vistas of related emotion, the Sitwellian image, and the imagery of much other modern poetry, is static, limited to one aspect, forbidding any development of the comparison

At times Edith Sitwell emulated the Cubist painters in abolishing organic shape Worringer in Germany and Hulme in England had pointed out that a sense of disharmony between man and nature was always accompanied by the substitution of geometrical for naturalistic forms Edith Sitwell, more than the Imagists proper, illustrates this tendency in such an early poem as *Stopping Place* —

In highly varnished noisy heat  
As through a lens that does not fit—  
The faces jolt in cubes and I  
Perceive their odd solidity  
And lack of meaning absolute

The mechanical universe must be described in mechanical terms, or at least in images drawn from art rather than nature. The triviality of life is enhanced when elemental things are portrayed in terms of man's own creations "the smooth black lacquer sea", "a mushined cloud"; "the little nachreous breeze that plays with gilt rococo seas" (*Rain*), "trees periwigged and snuffy"—recalling the famous line of the Elizabethan poet, Joshua Sylvester, ridiculed by Dryden. To this imposition of artificial formality on natural objects is added another characteristic common to much recent French poetry as well as painting, namely, solidity. Like the Cubists she tried to present simultaneously several sensuous aspects of objects, to mingle planes, dimensions. Thus the bizarre image "elephant trunks of the water" sought to suggest the greyness, the long, rounded, writhing

curves, the power, and the roar of waves , while “ pig-snouted darkness,” another favourite image, suggests the repulsive, chill, burrowing approach of the enemy of light

One of Edith Sitwell’s favourite devices was the application of the same or similar epithets to different objects in order to give unity of feeling This suffusion of imagery is well illustrated in *Serenade at Morning* where the predominant impression of soft curves is obtained by the return of an epithet —

Bird-breasted flutes by the green waterfalls,  
The green bird-bosomed waterfalls ,

The intensity of sensuous co-ordination leads at times to an actual confusion of the senses This had been found in other poets, such as Shelley and Manley Hopkins, while Rimbaud had “ invented the vowels A, black , E, white , I, red , O, blue , U, green ” (*Alchimie du Verbe*), and declared that “ the poet makes himself a visionary by a long, immense, and reasoned confusion of all the senses ” But no mere literary influence could account for the lavish use made of it by Edith Sitwell Sound or touch awakened sensations of sight in “ the swinish hairy breasts of the rough wind,” and sight evoked sound in “ The morning light whines on the floor ” “ Blue wind,” “ green airs,” “ mellow whining early dew,” light “ braying like an ass,” “ pink freezing stars ” are examples of this unique fancy

A good instance occurs in the well-known poem

*Aubade*, which the poet herself has explained for the uninitiated. Because Jane the maid is a mindless, wooden-headed creature, the piece is suffused with images of wood, hardness, clumsiness, and pallor. The pale morning light seems to creak like the stairs Jane comes down, the rain falls in lines like "dull blunt wooden stalactites," her vacuous brain (if it thought at all) would conceive life as "eternities of kitchen-garden," with flowers as ragged as her "cockscomb hair" and wooden as her mind, the flames of her kitchen fire have the colours of her familiar carrots and turnips, the pale milk, too, has a "weak mind" which is turned by the sight of her hair. This imposition on the external world of symbols evoked by the poet's criticism of the central object is frequent in Edith Sitwell's poetry.

Such careful organisation of imagery is not always observed. There was a strain of dadaism as well as of cubism in Edith Sitwell, and her poetry was at times just a sequence of images bound by no conscious thought. In France, just after the 1914-18 war, there was a cult of the unconscious, relying on the drifting undercurrents of the mind to give direction to a free play of association. Something of this nature is apparent in *Façade* and the *Bucolic Comedies*. Here images are no longer the symbols of "correspondences" but isolated bright counters. No need to search for meaning, since none is intended. If the succession of incoherent ideas occasionally produces a witty effect, that is merely incidental to what is really an arabesque of sensations.

and memories) The only conscious principle of unity in *Lullaby for Jumbo* or *Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone* is in the rhythm As the poet declared "The poems in *Façade* are technical experiments—studies in the effect that varying and elaborate patterns of rhymes and of assonances and dissonances have upon rhythm" (Preface to *Collected Poems*)

She was one of the first modern English poets to approximate verse to modern music by the creation of insistent metrical patterns Without doubt she learned much from the American Vachel Lindsay's *Congo* (1914), an experiment in the "Higher Vaudeville" Setting out to imitate the rhythms of popular songs, country-dances, jazz-steps, she lavished all her skill in poetic cadence, gaining an amazingly varied effect of pause, slur, run, syncopation, all bound together in a dominating pattern of sound In her fox-trots and polkas words exist as combinations of sound and accent, meaning is abolished in an exquisite art of sensations

Her recent volumes, *Street Songs* (1942), *Green Song and other poems* (1944) and *The Song of the Cold* (1945) have a new depth which comes from participation in the griefs of the modern world and from a realisation of the vital energies in nature and man The effect is still lavish, ornate, but the periwigged style has been largely discarded The grotesque symbols of her war-poems (e.g. *The Baboun*, *The Pterodactyl* and the *Bone of Lullaby*) are accompanied by a less arbitrary naturalism given direction by Biblical and mythological allusion

Thus *An Old Woman* is a poem of sun-worship

And he who blessed the fox with a golden fleece,  
 And covered earth with ears of corn like the planets  
 Bearded with thick ripe gold,  
 For the holy bread of mankind, blessed my clay  
     to him, the heat of the earth  
 And beat of the heart are one,—  
 Born from the energy of the world, the love  
 That keeps the golden ones in their place above,  
 And hearts and blood of beasts ever in motion

Rococo jewel-work has given place to a Dionysian fecundity (e.g. *Song for Two Voices*), which is crossed by intimations of Christianity (*Still Falls the Rain*). These two elements blend in *Holiday* in the image  
 Of Christ who forgives us—He with the bright Hair  
 —The Sun Whose Body was spilt on our fields to bring us harvest

*The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age* and *O bitter Love, O Death* have the pagan awe of mortality. In other poems of rich allusion and joy in the colourful, failing world, and especially in the shorter, songlike pieces (e.g. *Most Lovely Shade*, *A Young Girl, Years, O yet forgive*, *The Youth with the Red-Gold Hair*), she is prophetic with love of life, and the splendid imagery sparkles with inner light, not with witty artifice. Fancy has become imagination, the indefatigable experimenter is now a true “maker”, and *The Shadow of Cain* (1947), although too rhetorical for success, suggests that Miss Sitwell may write an important long poem when she has fused her new use of symbols with her new way of thought.

With his sister, Sir Osbert Sitwell published in 1916 a volume called *Twentieth Century Harlequinade*, marked by the mood of the time, but as we have already seen, his disillusionment tended to satire. Less richly endowed in sensations, more interested in people and manners, he dipped nevertheless into the common well of family images, as his *Fountains* shows. And his satiric mood, strongest in 1919-20, changed with travel and under the stimulus of his sister's metrical experiments. Like her he confused the senses, writing of "a clatter of light," and "his floating voice has wings that brush us like a butterfly", like her he loved a vivid unexpectedness "the parrot-feathered tropic ocean," "the hard wooden music of the hills". But these images, common in *Out of the Flame* (1923), were for the most part borrowed ornaments stuck in the bosom of his own plainer style. His purely rhythmical studies had less vitality, less sense of the verse-paragraph, than his sister's *Fox-trot*, describing the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, came nearer, in its forthright crudity, to Vachel Lindsay than to her later *Gold Coast Customs*. —

The ten thousand niggers beat on gourds and golden gongs,  
Slashing the air with their piebald songs

He was more himself in *England Reclaimed*, which, with its companion piece *Old Friends*, constitutes a portrait-gallery of whimsical English characters, in *vers libre* more controlled than that of his satires, but lacking the music of the best Imagist cadences. He is never a master of verse-rhythm.

He uses symbolism and realism alternately, only in *Winter the Huntsman* is satire fused with fantasy, where he symbolises the decay of faith, the prevalence of superstition, "the winter of our discontents," the modern pursuit of wealth, the artist's struggle to express himself in a practical age. An uneven talent, which found its true *métier* in prose.

Sacheverell Sitwell approached his sister more nearly, using the baroque manner for lyrical, descriptive, and satiric work. He exercised a considerable virtuosity in stanzas modelled on Jacobean and Caroline structure, and in paragraphs of blank verse irregularly varying from four to eight stresses and sometimes faltering out of metre.

His favourite device is not the confusion or free association of images, but an art based on art, the writing of variations on themes suggested by the imagery of other poets, by statues, building, or pictures, as witness his *Four Variations upon William Browne of Tavistock*, his *Winter-Song, an Adaptation from John Milton*, and his *Variation on a Theme by Alexander Pope*. In each of these a phrase of the original is the starting-point for an entirely personal lyric. The poet whom he most nearly resembles in the purity of his sensuous delight is Marvell, whose garden poems have influenced him greatly.

Then in the dark, this cherry-tree,  
Red-lipped as her I longed to see,  
She may have climbed, for aught I know,  
And lying on that bough in snow  
Was little more than moonlight there  
With only amber-dropping hair (*Water-Song*)

If he "affects the metaphysics," it is the metaphysics of the sensations,

Annihilating all that's made  
To a green thought in a green shade (Marvell)

But he lacks Marvell's contact with life and the power of sustained contemplation; he is "one for whom the visible world exists," and that almost alone. A lace-work of imagery is more to him than passion, reflection, or truth to legend. His is an art of fine needlework, shown at its best in *Canons of Giant Art*, where he weaves mythological patterns in swinging lines of great syllabic freedom, and in *Hortus Conclusus*, where he snares the soul of trees and fruits in phrases richly stained as the brightest passages of Shelley. He is best when external, moving on the periphery of passions, as in his account of the love-making of Dido and Aeneas in *The Royal Hunt and Storm in the Forest*. He fails in reflection and satire—in *Thus spake Zarathustra* and *Doctor Donne and Gargantua*, where he attempts the grotesque treatment of contemporary problems.

The Sitwells are virtuosi of language, most of their work already suffers the inevitable fate of those to whom manner is more than matter. Fanciful rather than imaginative, ingenious and witty, their contribution to poetic technique was considerable. They broke away from the purely "natural" usage and showed the value of new similitudes, fostered rhythmical flexibility by their experiments in metre and texture, invented a new instrument of satire, and vindicated a decorative art where, in the main, "All is surface and so must die."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

HERBERT READ D H LAWRENCE T S ELIOT

THE three poets to be treated in this chapter are by no means equal in poetic value, nor do they all belong to one poetic school, but they may well be taken together as a study in three diverse attempts at stabilising the crumbling world of war and "peace" by individual philosophies of life. All three had relations with the Imagist group, but all three developed beyond the Imagist technique in their search for something more than a merely poetic absolute.

"Mr Herbert Read's early experiments in Imagist impressionism in *Eclogues*, 1914-18, were marred by youthful imitativeness. This failing was absent from the war poems—*Naked Warriors*, his Happy Warrior who stabs and stabs again "a well-killed Boche," his Kneeshaw who sees a comrade sink in the mud and himself cleaves with his pick the skull of a buried man, are among the most living pictures of the War. The fellowship of the doomed was never more powerfully expressed than in "A man of mine lies on the wire," and in the cry

O beautiful men, O men I loved,  
O whither are you gone, my company?

The war left Read one of "a cynic race," driven "to bleak ecstasies", he could not trust love,

since "love turns to hate", he learned from Hulme that "words lie". Yet he yearned for an absolute which he thought unattainable, in love, poetry, and philosophy. *The Analysis of Love*, *Retreat*, and *The Lament of Saint Denis* show that he set out to adapt the Imagist technique for philosophical poetry.

The *Analysis of Love* is the analysis of the mind's isolation. He would have

The beauty settled in my mind  
A lamp in a busy street,

but communication is impossible, for imagination lags behind emotion, and poetry cannot keep up with the "mind's eye". His search is always for mental poise, intelligence, not instinct, is his guide. Lust is

a finite thing  
Deftly to be seized by the passionless mind ,

he regrets the moments when his loved one's mind is "lapsed in her sex", she can never plumb the depths of his mind, nor trace "The hidden source of the mind's emotion". For he is conscious of the essential solitude of finite beings. In all human actions "a great Prince in prison lies". And so he snatches at any "passionless mood" in which the turmoil of "human littleness" is absorbed.

He found support in a tenuous apprehension of cosmic unity. He was a mystic without faith. The Being in which he strove to lose himself was

not the Christian Absolute, but the impersonal totality of the universe behind the flow of life and death One of his finest poems, *The Retreat*, sets against Henry Vaughan's yearning for childhood's innocence and the state of pre-existence, a modern parallel He tells how in moods of calm the mind frets "On all the futile longingness of men" There is a state of being beyond these, beyond mind , there is

An element incarnate in everything Life is but a  
lesser lesion  
Of this extensive energy

Faced by such an infinitude, the little agonies of men echo faintly through the wastes of stars Our miseries themselves are signs of our yearning towards the universal rhythm The life of the senses is but a dream, the higher life of intelligence a breaking of the harmony

Beyond time and space there is a beauty  
Not to be seized by men in prison, who but languish  
In shackles carried from the womb, and worn  
Unto the release of death unto the dark return  
Of the world's harmony

In this noble reflective poetry the reminiscences of Wordsworth serve to emphasise Mr Read's divergence from romantic pantheism

*The Lament of Saint Denis* embodies the same feeling of division in an entirely different technique, that of allegorical symbol ; the influence of *The Waste Land* is obvious. Pausing bewildered among rocks, a " rheumy host of men " who climb burdened

is met by another host "Clothed in light with limbs unveiled and free" These are the youth of the future whose way is blocked by the errors of former generations Saint Denis, representing the aspirant to esoteric wisdom and, at the same time, our contemporary confusion, summarises the anguish of the human spirit "I am chaos and dark nothingness." . He has little hope to offer, and the poem ends with despair.

Mr Read was long in finding an assured solution of his metaphysical problems Like Vaughan and Wordsworth he looked back to childhood, and came to see happiness in the preservation of the "innocent eye," meaning by that, however, not Traherne's childish *naïveté*, but the "wandering wavering grace of humble men," intellectual integrity, an inquiring spirit, and the fulfilment of the instincts (*The Innocent Eye*) In that very uneven poem, *The End of a War*, he was still occupied with the cosmic relations of the individual The monologues of his dying German officer and his waking English officer are speculations on the nature of reality Despite the Catholicism of the dialogue between the body and the soul of the murdered girl, doubt prevails The views of religion are in keeping with the characters But the last word is with the English officer whose "meek heart rejoices doubting," and there is a faint promise of final revelation for him who tries to trace divine love through all our catastrophes

Perhaps because he is so much at home in abstractions, Mr Read's poetry did not at first

receive the attention it deserved He prefaced his *Collected Poems* with the challenging quotation from Chapman : "Obscurity in affectation of words and indigested conceits is pedantical and childish , but where it shroudeth itself in the heart of his subject, uttered with fitness of figure and expressive epithets, with that darkness will I still labour to be shadowed " | It is not difficult to find examples of pedantical obscurity in these poems Pound in *Mauberley* used a dry elliptical expression to emphasise his ironic detachment from his personal history, and in banishing lyricism and emotional surplusage, banished grace and simplicity | Mr Read went further Abstraction for him was not a mask, but a natural manner of utterance He strove to walk on the dangerous edge of "passionate ratiocination," and frequently fell from passion altogether Thought alone does not constitute poetry, however profound or gnomically expressed The error is common in recent verse

Moreover, Mr Read is something of a Saint Denis with his eye on the poetic absolute To him, as to Valéry, poetry is an asceticism, "une exercice plutôt qu'une délivrance, une manœuvre de moi-même par moi-même plutôt qu'une préparation visant le public " | According to this view the publication of a poem is an accident, its audience an irrelevance , the poet writes for himself alone, and seeks by the progressive elimination of all prose elements to attain to "pure poetry." Can we wonder that eccentricities and obscurities result? Read went too far in the reduction of words

to counters, almost to mathematical symbols, in his aspiration towards a poetry in which every particle tells. At its extreme this functionalism produces a skeletal framework, at its best a poetry like the Forth Bridge, cleanly articulated, with the secondary beauty of a scientific demonstration, dependent for its significance on the intellectual weight which it carries.

During the past ten years, moreover, Mr Read has admitted more fullness of expression, as the poems in *A World within a War* (1944) make clear. The development is connected with the growth of his faith in man, in a soul of goodness in the universe, and in the ultimate achievement of political Anarchy (the rule of love). The political aspect can be seen in the beautiful *Song for the Spanish Anarchists*, the faith in man shines through the unembittered gravity of *To a Conscript of 1940*.

To fight without hope is to fight with grace,  
The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired

His later poetry is much concerned with the reconstruction or harmonising of the self—as individual and as citizen.

The title-poem, a series of reflections in “A secular and insecure retreat,” his house by a beechwood not far from London, sprang from the dangers of wartime. Part I, with its charming description of the setting, in a fluency new to the poet, states the main theme, security amid insecurity; Part II carries on the idea of “retreat” when the writer imagines his life there as like that

of a mediæval monk inditing a Book of Hours with

Talk mainly of the Human Passion  
That made us in a conscious fashion

Strive to control our human fate

and with pictures of modern saints who

wore instead of hairshirts burdens

Of a mild domestic sort but so devout  
That suddenly they would go out

And die for freedom in the street

In Part III the poet walks "through the woods with God," and, meditating on man, sees that he shares God's nature though "How torn and fretted by vain energies" This design being perceived, life can move

in good gait and going  
In fine song and singular sign in all  
God's festival of perfect form

Part IV sees the woodland "cell" as a home of peace in a world of alarm and horror Through the dark woods of the human heart move immemorial cruelty and suffering , but the martyred saints overcome pain and can pity their slayers This grace and glory is an augury of noble action

We shall act we shall build  
A crystal city in the age of peace  
Setting out from an island of calm  
A limpid source of love

Part V accepts the imminent danger to his loved ones and ends the poem in tenderness and love.

*A World within a War*, like Mr Read's other long pieces, is an attempt to write philosophical poetry and to avoid the *longueurs* of discursive linkage by using recurrent images intended to bring the several parts of the poem into relationship. We shall find Mr T S Eliot facing the same problems in his own way, and with greater mastery. But this poem of Mr Read's is very good, and when we find that his Dunkirk *Ode* is almost equally successful in giving noble expression to the spiritual upheaval in the individual which turned defeat into a national revival, we must hail him as one of the most important of living poets, both for the spare integrity of his form and for the restrained beauty of his ideal.

The self perfected  
tranquil as a dove  
the heart elected  
to mutual aid

Reason and love  
incurved like a prow  
a blade dividing  
time's contrary flow

Poetry a pennon  
rippling above  
in the fabulous wind (*Ode*)

The work of D H Lawrence was in every way a complete antithesis to that of Mr Read. Lawrence's touch in poetry was surer than in his novels. In poetry he never entirely lost his sense of form, the purely didactic element was less, the childish

prejudices, the pseudo-philosophy, the jargon, were absent, the lyrical genius was not overlaid with tedious digression

His early verse, influenced by Browning and perhaps Meredith, was full of the wild vitality of nature "How splendid it is to be substance here!" But colour, scent, movement, bring intimations of human emotion In dialect poems, like *The Collier's Wife*, *Violets*, *Whether or Not*, he portrayed passionate moments in the lives of his own shrewd working-class people This directness and passion, with a foretaste of his own peculiar mixture of cruelty and tenderness, marked such poems as *Love on the Farm* and *Snapdragon* (which appeared like a portent among the paler flowers of *Georgian Poetry*, 1911-12)

Already he wrote in symbols, and dealt veraciously in the sexual conflict From the ithyphallic yearnings of *Virgin Youth* (later rewritten) he passed to the first experiments in love, to raptures in which natural phenomena were caught up into the life of the senses, and to subtle moods complex with desire and revulsion, as in *Lightning*, *Hands of the Beloved*, *Lilies in the Fire*, *Repulsed*

This precision of emotional suggestion is most clearly shown in the poems on the relationship of mother and son He declared that the first period of his poetry came to its crisis with "the death of the mother, with the long haunting of death in life which continues" through the war<sup>1</sup> An occasional sentimentality mars the poems of this

<sup>1</sup> Preface *Collected Poems*

phase, but on the whole they are powerful in their portrayal of the mother's grief as her son breaks away from her too importunate love, and of the son's remorse, impatient of her demands, yet recognising her need. But the fullness of their relationship is revealed in the lovely lyrics after her death, "If I could put you in my heart," "My love looks like a girl to-night," *The Virgin-Mother* and the many poems haunted by her shadow.

From the first he dabbled in impressionism, shown in such poems as *Corot*, *Piccadilly Circus at Night*, *Morning Work* "I admit your accusations of impressionism and dogmatism," he wrote to a friend in 1909 "Suddenly, in a world full of tones and tints and shadows, I see a colour and it vibrates on my retina I dip my brush in it and say, 'See, that's the colour'"<sup>1</sup> This and his clear-cut imagery brought him to the notice of Ezra Pound and the Imagists, and he contributed to Miss Lowell's anthology of 1915. What they lacked, Lawrence had—a power of infusing his gorgeous images with human passion. Not for him the flight to Ancient Greece, Italian Comedy, or the Far East. He felt the omnipresent conflict of life,

our fire to the innermost fire  
Leaping like spray, in the return of passion

In his struggle with his mother, and his early loves, he held fast to the "secret places" of his soul (*Tease*). Because he knew industrialism he had none of the love of the machine now popular

<sup>1</sup> To H C, *Letters*, p. 2

among the utopian and the "æsthetic", he wrote of

the soul of a people imprisoned asleep in the rule  
of the strong machine that runs mesmeric

The machine was the opposite of his ideal " My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect We can go wrong in our minds But what our blood feels and believes and says is always true The intellect is only a bit and a bridle "<sup>1</sup> The strength—and the weakness—of his poetry came from this assumption that instinct alone repays study His own special aim was " the establishment of a new relation, or the readjustment of the old one, between men and women "<sup>2</sup>

This is not the place to trace the story of Lawrence's marriage and of his vicissitudes at home and abroad after 1912 Poetically, however, the change in his mode of life was decisive for form and content Hitherto he had experimented little outside traditional metres, and although he had already obtained a free, idiomatic expression, much of his diction and rhythm was derived from the Romantics and Victorians Emotional liberation, and the influence of Imagism and Walt Whitman, led him to free verse. The transition coincided with a revulsion from the Georgians, and was made easier by the fact that his scansion of metres had always been unconventional, as his discussion of Dowson's *Cynara* shows ] " I think more of a

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p 94

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p 118

bird with broad wings flying and lapsing through the air than anything, when I think of metre”<sup>1</sup>  
 At its best his free verse has natural cadence, most harmonious in its balancing of strophes, achieving its end by an adroit tempering of emotion rather than by external rule Imagist parsimony and preciousity were alien to his nature, in later poems, under the conscious influence of Whitman, he was betrayed by excitement and didactic aims into diffuseness

The poems of *Look! We have come through*, embody the quickened apprehension occasioned by his great adventure “The conflict of love and hate goes on between the man and the woman, and between these two and the world around them, till it reaches some sort of conclusion” (*Argument*) Here the brilliant scenery of Germany and Italy, the brooding energy of hot lands, is interpenetrated with the fervour of spirit leaping through the body, the assurance or the questioning of love’s union At the heart of his imaginative struggle was the problem of sexual polarisation, of the reconciliation of self-surrender with spiritual integrity Such poems as *In the Dark* and *Both Sides of the Medal* are full of this His attitude might seem superficially to resemble Milton’s

And serve now, woman, as a woman should,  
 Implicitly (*Lady Wife*)

Yet this is not subordination of one partner to another, he desired for each a distinctness both

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, pp 153-5

physical and mental (e.g. *She Said as Well to Me, Wedlock*) Love must bring a reintegration of individuality. But this could come only through the surrender of self in the act of loving, by a kind of death in "the unknown strong current of life supreme." Out of this dark depth of unconsciousness came rebirth, a true recognition of "the other," a new equality of the sexes.

It was a mysticism of sex where the senses played their part in a union of the soul with the unconscious forces within life itself. What Herbert Read tried to perceive intellectually, in isolation, Lawrence achieved through the elimination of intellect in a rapture of flesh and blood. While the end of Read's early course was nonentity, that of Lawrence was resurrection, a return to the earth, no longer as "God and the creation at once," but as

the discoverer !  
I have found the other world !

Such doctrines give to his poetry its full significance. The theory, however, is only one aspect of the power which makes him a great love poet. In *A Young Wife*, *Green*, *Gloire de Dijon*, *I am like a Rose*, *Misery*, *Winter Dawn*, *December Night*, *New Year's Eve*, *New Year's Night*, *Birth Night*, *Coming Awake*, explicit doctrine is consumed in passion, and the form is most perfect. But he wore the loose mantle of Walt Whitman with a brave new air in the prophetic poems in which he announced the triumph of love over self, and over the wartime horror which afflicted him with

a strange Hebraic sense of responsibility and atonement The new man demanded a new world of his own creation

A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time

If only I am keen and hard like the sheer lip of a wedge  
Driven by invisible blows,  
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall  
find the Hesperides

For a time it seemed easy "there will only remain that all men detach themselves and become unique" (*Manifesto*) But his several biographers show how much his later life was embittered by his failure to stir the world

To me, men are palpable, invisible nearnesses in the dark,  
Sending out magnetic vibrations of warning, pitch-dark  
throbs of invitation

This objective perception and acceptance of the barriers between people and things was a faculty quite alien to the romanticism of his earlier work We may trace it in the growth of his aversion to the Georgian poets, and in his (qualified) admiration for the Futurists under Marinetti Its operation is strikingly displayed in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* He is the Van Gogh of poetry, subjecting the forms of subhuman nature to his impersonal *dæmon* Unlike most of the Georgians, he acknowledges the alien life, does not sentimentalise over snakes, elephants, kangaroos, or dogs (cf *Bubbles*), does not try to shed his humanity and *become* them, but stands outside and watches their essential difference So he contemplates the Mosquito,

amused and horrified at its manœuvres, feels terror at the obscene flight of a bat in his room, wonders at the shape, the secret meaning of the peach. Some creatures he treats as symbols of civilisation, for instance, the burst fig suggests the blatancy of modern feminism. But more often he sees them as symbols of the "dark forces" of life. Medlars and Sorb Apples evoke death and the Underworld, grapes suggest "the world before the flood, where man was dark and evasive." Cypresses in Tuscany bring back the secret of sensual life which he believed the Etruscans possessed (cf. *Etruscan Places*). Under the comedy and grotesqueness of animal life he sees the community of principle. If he mocks at the He-Goat's lascivious capers as the symptom of enervating domestication, he hears in the cry of the rutting tortoise the eternal cry of sex "which breaks up our integrity, our single inviolability, our deep silence."

It is more than a Priapic religion of fertility that Lawrence preaches. It is a psycho-physical unity below the effervescent intelligence. His value as a poet springs from the intensity with which this profound apprehension brings the external world into intimate relationship with the inner world of instinct and emotion. Despite his occasional turgidity, hysteria, crudities, imitations of Whitman's barbaric yawp, he was an important poet.

While both Read and Lawrence found some resolution of their spiritual difficulties in the exercise of individuality rebellious against external impulsion,

Mr T S Eliot became the leader of a movement back to authority. The heir of Matthew Arnold and T E Hulme in criticism, he turned away, almost at the beginning of his career, from romantic self-exploitation in poetry "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" "No poet, no artist or any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" The poet must be a scholar, obedient to the pressure of the past, but tradition as he thought of it was not insular "The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity"<sup>1</sup>

Among the permanent influences on Mr Eliot we may note that of the post-Shakespearian dramatists, but many of his first poems, in *Prufrock* (1917), owe much to Corbière and Laforgue. Mr Eliot indeed carried on the symbolist influence when many other poets were turning to a more unmitigated realism. Something of Laforgue's shamefaced romanticism remained for a long time with him. The flippant irony which is a refuge for

<sup>1</sup> *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1917)

the imaginative idealist in an uncomprehending world shows itself in *Conversation Galante*. Self-deprecation, sentimentality at one remove, delicate analysis of mood, evocation of atmosphere by casual conversation, irrelevant verisimilitude, a loosening of iambic rhythms analogous to Laforgue's experiments with French verse (as well as to Jacobean practice), the use of contemporary material everyday urban life, salons, dismal streets all are introduced to suggest ironies of feeling and situation. Laforgue lacked the hardness and assurance of satiric portraiture in Eliot's *Portrait* and his *Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock*. The method is epitomised in the lines

It is impossible to say just what I mean !

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns  
on a screen

He suggests an emotional impasse by veiled hints corresponding to a "hundred indecisions" of mood. A mastery of phrase is already apparent

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons

I grow old      I grow old  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled—

each image mingling concreteness with spiritual deflation. No previous poet had so cleverly captured the atmosphere of mean streets and mean rooms (*Preludes*). What to Henley or the Georgians seemed a daring invasion was for Eliot a natural entry into the age's imaginative heritage. In *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* impressionism unites with memory in ennui and horror. Its success depends

on the fact that the "crowd of twisted things" thrown up by the memory in free association are really transfused by the dominant mood, and the mood becomes intelligible through this association Mr Eliot's development brought an increased economy and a more varied use of such an organisation of images

His love of word-patterns gives to his work a certain slowness of evolution, at times a preciosity  
'He repeats images and words like phrases in music,  
makes use of refrains and word-play

There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet

His cadences owe something to the Imagists, he acknowledges a debt to Pound Like the latter he turned to social satire in such American studies as *Cousin Nancy* and *Mr Apollinaire* But free verse was not congenial Like Pound again he returned to traditional forms and helped in the revival of the four-stressed quatrain To this he added, in *Poems* 1920, experiment in the blank verse of Webster and Middleton

This volume is especially valuable as showing Mr Eliot's preparation for the greater achievement of *The Waste Land* (1922) He was developing his skill in hitting off representative types, but now left the peccadilloes of refined society for the vices of cosmopolitan Europe Satiric detachment replaced dramatic self-analysis His imagery became more and more heterogeneous, moods were evoked by the clash of wit and an increased indirection

Another important factor now entered Haunted by the contrast in Europe between present and past, he beheld the latter chiefly through its art So when he wished, in *Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar*, to summon up the lost glory of Venice, he did so by referring to some half-dozen literary sources, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, and Ruskin Mordant irony was obtained by sudden juxtapositions of ornate description and sordid realism Thus he compressed into two or three stanzas a whole history of decline and fall , and his poem, far from seeming a mere mosaic of quotations, became a light of incredible intensity showing past and present in perspective

The *Sweeney* poems, with their satire on sexual vulgarity, conveyed in dry objective statement his growing disgust with modern manners *Whispers of Immortality* showed that his dissatisfaction was more than the revulsion of a fastidious scholar against vice “ Webster was much possessed by death,” and Mr Eliot set not only modern self-indulgence but modern religion against a background of ultimate values “ Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion ” If *A Cooking Egg* satirises modern ideals, *The Hippopotamus* satirises the Church in the world, as can best be seen by reading Gautier’s *L’Hippopotame*, on which it is based.

*Gerontion* expounds most clearly Mr Eliot’s state of mind at that time Here a man, old in spirit, spinning disconnected “ Thoughts of a dry brain in

a dry season," inhabits "a decayed house" in a composite squalor, and looks back on the changes and futility of life He remembers how, in the spring, when a sign was demanded of God, "Came Christ the Tiger" But the coming of the Word was unavailing, the reverence due to His Body was given to "flowering Judas", and he remembers the postures of various types who carried on the betrayal ✓He remarks on the wasteful operations of life, the imbroglio of vice and virtue due to the "wrath-bearing tree" of original sin His own life has failed, he sees the emptiness of all sensual acts; at the last, mundane self-seekers are brought to nothing, like gulls in a storm, and he himself is driven to a sleepy corner

The poem is incoherent, and criticism cannot be disarmed by Gerontion's senility But it shows Mr Eliot's growing insistence on religion He came to agree more and more with T E Hulme that "dogmas like that of Original Sin are the closest expression of the categories of the religious attitude That man is in no sense perfect, but a wretched creature, who can yet apprehend perfection" *The Waste Land* was a demand for such a realisation

Before considering this poem, something more must be said of Eliot's method Abandoning Laforgue's adolescent nostalgia, he had developed a satiric dryness of witty statement in which "facts" were left to evoke emotion with a minimum of explicit correlation The technique was difficult In such poetry the mood is too complex for initial

statement, but is the implied resultant of the whole poem and is often (as in *Sweeney among the Nightingales*) not formulated until the close. Hence the final emergence of harmony out of heterogeneity is entirely dependent upon a clear concatenation of imagery. Now it is precisely in the concatenation of imagery that the poetry of Eliot (and his followers) sets up obstacles. When the poet asks

But where is the penny world I bought  
To eat with Pipit behind the screen?

and immediately continues

The red-eyed scavengers are creeping  
From Kentish Town and Golder's Green

*(A Cooking Egg)*

the clash of symbols—the contrast of childish idealism and sordid fact—is harmonised into a profound sense of loss. But when in *Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service*, after describing the progress of theology to Origen, the *Baptism* of an Umbrian painter, the formalism of ecclesiastical penance, the bees at work in the garden, he shows us Sweeney in his bath, the reader of some education may be forgiven for having merely a vague suspicion that the poem deals with the forgiveness of sins. The first word of the poem, "Polyphiloprogenitive," suggests a wilful pedantry. Among the many gifts handed on by Mr Eliot from the Metaphysicals was a poetry involved with far-fetched erudition. The fashion was a salutary reaction against contemporary mindlessness, it was pursued with something of the

naïve enthusiasm of the Renaissance, a love of new words, strange instances, subtle allusions But for all its idiomatic rhythm and urban references modern Metaphysical verse is more out of touch with the habits and expression of ordinary men than was the poetry of Donne and Carew And the work of many of Eliot's imitators was farther from poetical imagination than were the Georgian fantasies against which they rebelled

The success of quotations is contingent on two factors the intrinsic value of the quotation in its new context quite apart from any recognition of its original source , and the density of colour resulting from the recognition of the original source and its relation to the new context Given intrinsic value, the average reader will find an adequate (though not full) significance in the most recondite allusions , and many of Mr Eliot's quotations make this possible Otherwise, success depends entirely upon a community of literary background between writer and reader ✓ In practice the frequent use of unattributed allusions demanding a close knowledge of even the accepted "classics" strains the reader's attention Poetry comes to depend on scholarship In *The Waste Land*, Mr Eliot did not conquer this tendency of *Poems*, 1920 , yet it comes near to being a great poem

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition,

said *Gerontion*, aptly describing the poet's attitude during what may be called his second period

*The Waste Land* goes beyond a mere diagnosis of the spiritual distempers of the age, it is a lament over man's fallen nature, a prophecy, and a promise

Formally the poem has been described as "a music of ideas" and as "a poetic cryptogram" The second phrase suggests some weaknesses of the structure by which the poet sought the scope of the long poem without the relaxations of tension decried by Poe. Apart from the dominant mood, connecting links between the several parts may be found in a book of anthropology, Miss Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. There Miss Weston showed that the legend of the Holy Grail originated in a fertility cult related to those of Thammuz and Adonis. It tells how a questing Knight saved the Waste Land from drought occasioned by the old age of the ruler, known as the Fisher King. The Knight must restore the latter's youth by riding to the Chapel Perilous and there questioning the Lance and the Grail, symbols of the male and female principles. Mr Eliot's poem is an allegorical application of this story to modern society and religion. Our civilisation is the Waste Land, we can obtain youth and life-giving rain only by journeying far, questioning our condition, and learning a hard lesson. To enforce this, Mr Eliot uses symbols drawn from kindred myths and religions. The relationship between these must be known before the poem can be understood. And the difficulties of this anthropological background are increased by the methods

of thought which we have seen are natural to him<sup>1</sup> There are five parts, each containing sections bound variously, by superficial association of ideas, by contrast, or by no link save the underlying message To the uninitiated reader the poem may seem chaotic Only those with some knowledge of Dante, Jacobean drama, Buddhism, mythology, and the works of Sir James Frazer, as well as of *From Ritual to Romance*, can appreciate its movement, even with help from the poet's notes Yet no one could fail to be struck by the vigour and beauty of much of the detail ✓ What ironic pictures of modern manners, what a superb mingling of satiric vulgarity and sensuous delicacy, what prophetic earnestness, what variety of imagery and rhythm !

The best way to begin reading the poem is to regard it as a phantasmagoria of futility, a series of trains of thought in the mind of a social observer Mr Eliot indeed introduces such an observer (in a not very effective attempt at suggesting comprehensiveness and impersonality) in the person of Tiresias, the seer, who, having been both man and woman, suggests the characteristics of all humanity

Part 1, called *The Burial of the Dead*, to emphasise the inevitable dissolution which must precede new life, begins with a lament over the loss of fertility in what should be a spring-season, and illustrates this by reproducing typical chatter of cosmopolitan

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis see H R Williamson's *Poetry of T S Eliot*, also F R Leavis's account in *New Bearings*

idlers, passing thence to symbols of our barrenness

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
, And the dry stone no sound of water

The decay of love in the modern world is then suggested by a quotation from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (romantic idolatry), with which is compared an instance of amorous sentimentality That secret wisdom, too, has fallen on evil days is shown by the introduction of the Tarot pack of cards, used formerly for divination, now for fortunetelling He ends with a vision of London as an Unreal City, in a nightmare of memories

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

The connection with the fertility cult is thus emphasised.

In Part 2, called *A Game of Chess*, to recall the dramatic irony of Middleton's Bianca and the fatal power of woman, he cleverly draws us two types of modern woman in contrasted literary styles After a picture of a luxurious boudoir which rivals Keats, he gives the petulant conversation of its tenant, and her eternal question ·

What shall we do to-morrow?  
What shall we ever do?

The man replies

The hot water at ten  
And if it rains, a closed car at four  
And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door

Then answering the word *knock*, the scene changes to a public-house at closing time, and the garrulous mean talk of another woman

In Part 3 the tone of disgust deepens. It is called *The Fire Sermon*, to suggest to the initiated the sermon of the Buddha, in which he spoke of mankind as burning in the flames of lust, hatred, and infatuation. Here we are shown the sordidness of urban pleasures. Just as he introduced into the boudoir touches of Cleopatra and Dido, so now he recalls the river of Spenser's *Prothalamion*, and with equally devastating irony goes on to parody Goldsmith's "When lovely woman," in order to contrast the cynicism of the modern girl with the eighteenth-century sentimental ideal. Similarly he uses Wagner's *Rheingold* melodies, and a picture of Queen Elizabeth flirting with Leicester in her barge, to emphasise the permanence of human sensuality and the degradation to which it has now fallen. With agony of soul he finally alludes to the repentance of Saint Augustine and to the teaching of the Buddha.

After a short fourth part, translated from one of his earlier experiments in French and emphasising the brevity of sensual life, the several themes are recapitulated in Part 5, and the way of escape suggested. Our sterility is again asserted.

Here is no water but only rock,  
Rock and no water and the sandy road,  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water

In this desert we suffer illusions, where two walk

there goes a shadowy third There are murmurs and lamentations When we reach the Chapel Perilous it seems empty , but as we doubt (betraying Christ) and the cock crows twice, God gives a sign, by thunder bringing rain And the message of the thunder is threefold Da, Dayadhvam, Damyata—Self-surrender, sympathy, self-control These three are the way to salvation

In a coda the poet speaks of setting his own house in order though London Bridge is falling down He must pass through the fire of purification (as Dante has shown) He is haunted by images of desolation, and a shower of literary allusions shows him slipping into frenzy But like a charm of healing rain he repeats the message of the thunder and ends with the Sanskrit blessing “ Shantih, shantih, shantih ” (The peace of God which passeth all understanding )

This sketch of the general outline of *The Waste Land* obscures the peculiar technique as well as many subtleties of the poem Repetition of images is the means of carrying on the symbolism from section to section, producing a “ music of ideas ” The image of the rocky desert, for instance, is brought in again and again ; “ crowds of people walking,” in Part 1, is repeated almost immediately, as “ A crowd flowed over London Bridge,” is associated with the frequent mention of footsteps, and becomes in Part 5 the “ hooded hordes swarming ” ; allusions to bells, thunder, rain, spring, bones, rats, recur with varying emotional tones The whole poem gains its unity from the inter-

weaving of such thematic material. This is the literary counterpart of the symphony to which the Symbolists aspired.

"Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood," wrote Mr Eliot in his essay on Dante. That must be true within limits, otherwise the success of Miss Sitwell's *Façade*, and of great patches of Swinburne, which rely entirely on the music and colour of words without anything to understand, would be inexplicable. But communication of this elementary sort is only preparatory to the final work of poetry, full communication is contingent on "understanding," on the linking of associations, of ideas.

*The Waste Land* is the most notable single poem of our time. But it has serious defects inherent in its origin and its method. Mr Eliot's attempt at rectifying the divorce between intelligence and sensibility fails by the remoteness of much of his material. In a word, *The Waste Land* does not carry within itself all that is necessary for understanding. Its structural basis lies in a specialised branch of learning, and it involves continual reference to other branches of knowledge with which few readers can be acquainted. The piece is not a self-contained entity. Despite its great influence, therefore, it is not Mr Eliot's most successful poem. That title I should give to his *The Four Quartets*.

In *The Waste Land* Mr Eliot's attitude was more negative than positive, analytic rather than synthetic. He was more aware of the facts of disintegration

than of the universal system in which the disintegration took place Poetically it was a cry in the dark, a longing for imaginative stability, for participation in an unknown ultimate order

The poems immediately succeeding *The Waste Land* enforce this conclusion In *Journey of the Magi* the wise men return home having seen God, but unrefreshed, dissatisfied with "the old dispensation," while the *Nunc Dimittis* of *A Song for Simeon* is a melancholy burden of oppression In *Ash Wednesday* Mr Eliot was occupied with personal salvation, with experiences closely akin to those undergone by the "twice-born" in their progress towards a state of Grace It is not purely fanciful to regard *The Waste Land* as corresponding to the phase in which (according to *Theologica Germanica*) the soul perceives "how and what our own life is, what God is and is doing in us", and to see the "hard and bitter agony" of the *Magi* as introducing the phase of suffering and self-mortification *Ash Wednesday*, while not a mystical poem, inasmuch as it describes no experience of mystical union, deals faithfully with certain common aspects of the Mystic Way, with the putting off of self, the passivity, the spiritual darkness, the fluctuations following on conversion Its title suggests the beginning of contrition and the distant hope of Easter

In the first section the soul turns away from human emulation, "The infirm glory of the positive hour," and finds some little joy in extreme renunciation But this is a remnant of selfishness , all thought, even the desire to soar above abasement,

must be abandoned "Teach us to sit still" Patience and prayer alone work in the "dark night of the soul" The second section describes the acceptance of spiritual death Its powers consumed, the soul is like the dry bones in Ezekiel When God tells them to prophesy they do so with the burden of the grasshopper, for desire has failed, and, invoking the "Lady of Silences," give thanks for their death in the desert

The third section is perhaps the finest of all The soul is climbing the stairs from earthly to heavenly things , it is on the second stair, for it has turned from the world, and on the first flight has left behind its struggle with hope and despair At the second turning of the second stair nothing is seen but darkness, an aged maw, the wreck of life, utter abandonment and negation Beyond this, at the first turning of the third stair, comes temptation, memories of the life of the senses "Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third stair" But the soul presses on, climbing, and prays "Lord, I am not worthy," for God is up there under his roof, and the end of ascent is healing and peace As he wrote in his essay on Dante, which illuminates the problems of this poem "The souls in purgatory suffer because they wish to suffer "

The fourth part deals with the transmutation of earthly experience into heavenly Remembering one who "Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour," once gave him strength and joy, he wishes to regain lost innocence, not by returning, but by

sublimating what was of the world into a higher dream So Dante's Beatrice was transfigured in the Vision The process of religious "illumination" is assisted by symbols "The token of the word unheard, unspoken"

This reference to the word leads on to the fifth section which tells how the Logos, the inexpressible Word of God immanent in the world, is rejected by men The poet asks a "Veiled Sister" to pray for the divided souls, the renegades, the cowards, for all who sit where the garden of God has been made desert

The last section returns to the main theme of the first, incidentally recalling elements from the others, in a summary of the soul's position It has not yet achieved peace, but still fluctuates between the old and the new, still wavers between "the profit and the loss" Self is not dead , temptation recurs

And the weak spirit quickens to rebel  
For the spent golden rod and the lost sea-smell

He is at "the time of tension between dying and birth," in "the place of solitude where three dreams cross" His only trust is that the veiled lady, who suggests Mary herself, will bring truth and unity of spirit. He ends, repeating the idea of the first section, but more hopefully, though Easter is not yet .

Teach us to sit still .  
Our peace in His will  
Suffer me not to be separated

Once again such a brief account misses the subtleties of this remarkable sequence, which is linked by many repetitions of idea and similarities of symbol. Allusiveness is here more restrained, the literary references are less recondite, largely owing to the use made of the Bible and the Liturgy, which also assist in the attainment of a grave, ceremonious style fitted to the dignity of the subject. The greater simplicity of imagery is fostered by the influence of Dante. *Ash Wednesday* is superior to *The Waste Land* in the intimacy of the conception, and the universality of its intellectual background. "That is the advantage of a coherent traditional system of dogma and morals like the Catholic, it stands apart, for understanding and assent even without belief, from the single individual who propounds it" (*Essay on Dante*). The poem derives its power from its participation in such a coherent religious tradition.

After this poem, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932) must seem a somewhat trivial return to an earlier mood. But it portrays insanity, the inarticulate converse of empty vulgarians in bold jazz rhythms. And it is a link with the serious poetic plays which followed. The first of these, *The Rock* (1934)—a pageant play—was close to *Ash Wednesday* in spirit. A minor work, it is, nevertheless, remarkable for its variety of rhythmical experiment. Biblical prose, loose accentual passages with and without rhyme, antiphonal movements, popular-song measures, irregular strophes reminiscent of *Samson Agonistes*, choral odes recalling those of Paul Claudel, long

rolling breakers of free verse, prove the poet's mastery of a new fullness of rhetoric, "the beauty of incantation" *Murder in the Cathedral*, written for the Canterbury Festival of 1935, deals with the death of Thomas à Becket in a manner akin to the Miracle Plays but with a Greek Chorus. The action is slight and episodic, the Archbishop returns from France to await death; he is tempted by embodiments of his own past weaknesses, he preaches a sermon on the nature of martyrdom, he is slain by four knights, and these defend their actions to the audience with the casuistry of modern politicians. Throughout, the Chorus suggests the bewilderment and desire for peace of simple folk. The main interest is threefold in the analysis of Becket's motives, in the eternal conflict between expediency and principle, and in the atmosphere of impending evil evoked by the Chorus through the stark imagery and surging rhythms of their odes.

The third play, *The Family Reunion* (1939), is a modern study in the Greek idea of *Nemesis* as found in the Orestes-plays of Aeschylus. Here the family curse works upon a group gathered together for the birthday of the domineering old mother. The young heir, returning after the death of the wife to whom he has been unhappily married, accuses himself of having murdered her. He is haunted by the Eumenides (Furies), but is brought to realise that his crime is linked with the hatred felt by his father for his mother, and that he can escape from despair and fear only by facing his own soul and

expiating his sin Again the story is slight, and not fully revealed , but the interest is unified, characterisation is more varied, and structure is better, The treatment of the Eumenides as projections of conscience gives a modern Christian interpretation of the classical motive , for the plea of Aeschylus' Orestes

All-mellowing Time makes old defilement pure

is shown to be false The soul can be made pure only by accepting the consequences of its defilement

*The Family Reunion* solves with some success the problem of the poetic play on contemporary themes (*cf* pp 48-9) Mr Eliot seeks the quintessence of situation and emotion, yet passes easily from the external life of his characters to their inmost motives by using selected details of everyday life as symbols of character and desire, and by flexible rhythms (unlike the stilted blank verse of the Georgians) capable of expressing both the dialogue of a family conference and the anguish of a soul in conflict He has achieved a drama which is frankly not naturalistic but symbolic, not "popular," nor indeed as "theatrical" as might be wished, yet powerful in its austerity of mood and style.

Mr Eliot's ideal is still social as well as personal "a society in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end, beatitude, for those who have eyes to see it" (*The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939)) And in series of long poems

which he published between 1936 and 1942 and collected as *The Four Quartets* he was still oppressed by the failure of the world to attain divine harmony. He was still seeking the vision of beatitude for which he yearned in *Ash Wednesday*, but now his scope was wider, and there are four main topics in each of these new poems—the metaphysical question of the relationship between time and eternity, the historical problem of good in society, the dilemma of the artist in his struggle with his medium, and the personal problem of spiritual illumination through self-discipline.

As the general title suggests, these pieces have an analogy with music, it consists in the use of recurrent themes and images, and in subtle variations of style and rhythm. Each poem has five parts (I) statement of two themes which are contrasted, (II) a lyrical passage followed by a colloquial one, (III) development or social application of the themes of (I) and (II), (IV) a lyrical cry, (V) personal application of the themes (usually with reference to poetry and religion), concluded by a dignified summary.

Each poem was suggested by a place—*Burnt Norton* (1936), by a visit to an empty country house in Gloucestershire, *East Coker* (1940) by the Somerset village, home of the Eliots in the seventeenth century, *The Dry Salvages* (1941) by memories of some rocks in the sea off Massachusetts (and of the Mississippi); *Little Gidding* (1942) by the seventeenth-century village community of Nicholas Ferrar in Cambridgeshire. A short analysis

may be helpful to some readers, but, like *Ash Wednesday*, these poems can be understood only by those acquainted with the Symbolist technique and with the Christian mysticism of St John of the Cross, *Theologia Germanica*, etc

*Burnt Norton* begins (I) by stating some paradoxes of time, the interpenetration of past, present and future, the mystery of what was, what might have been, what is, and what shall be. These are concretely and symbolically illustrated by reference to the visit to the Cotswold house

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose garden

A thrush's call, the box circle, the drained pool, "The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery," these moments of the past haunt the present as they did then, with intimations of some reality "just round the corner", they were and are and will be, timeless and eternal. Part II opens with an elaborate formal metaphysical poem imaging the universal "correspondences"

The dance along the artery  
The circulation of the lymph  
Are figured in the drift of stars  
Ascend to summer in the tree

He goes on to consider discursively "the still point of the turning world" whose existence is implied by this rhythmic unity. How to achieve in one's own life this inner stillness "Where past and

future are gathered," is the great spiritual problem

The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving

This would be to expand one's consciousness out of time, yet those remembered moments in Section I exist in time, this is the mystery "Only through time time is conquered" Part III recognises the difficulty of achieving this in a world of temporal confusion reminiscent of *Gerontion*

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind  
That blows before and after time

It can be done only by leaving this twilight chaos for the "Dark Night of the Soul" of the mystics described in *Ash Wednesday* Part IV puts into images the yearning of the soul for illumination, when the scattered beauties of highest earthly experience are caught up into the still light "At the still point of the turning world" Section V applies the conception to the making of poetry. The ideal of art is to reach

"The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness"

—a timeless pattern of relationships But words exist in time

"Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still

So the struggle of art and the struggle of religion are akin to one another. He ends by accepting the idea of conquering time by time, of touching on stillness through movement, as inevitable, it is imaged by the sudden shaft of sunlight, "the hidden laughter Of children in the foliage," which are "Quick now, here, now, always." It is the limitation of our human being that we can glimpse the eternal only in the instant.

*East Coker* brings these meditations closer to the history of man and of the poet himself. In the ancestral village he thinks of the agelong life there, the rhythm of the seasons, farming, birth, marriage and death—all symbolised by the peasant dancing which he describes in the words of Sir Thomas Elyot's *Governour* (1531), Book I, Chapter XXI. Part II turns to the rhythm of his own personal life. He asks, again in elaborate formal style, why middle age has not brought the calm wisdom he was led to expect—then breaks off impatient with himself.

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory  
 A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
 Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
 With words and meanings

So he abandons images to put it more plainly, explaining that we do not learn from experience for experience is ever-shifting, and (as the Gestalt psychologists show)

the pattern is new in every moment  
 And every moment is a new and shocking  
 Valuation of all we have been

Not worldly wisdom is desirable, but "the wisdom of humility"

Part III tells how the worldly wise, the rich, the famous, "all go into the dark" of oblivion. The true way of life is to seek the "darkness of God," casting off all desires, even those of the spirit.

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing, wait without  
love

For love would be love of the wrong thing

He knows that he has said all this before, but he repeats it in the words of St John of the Cross

In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance

Part IV puts the teaching of the Church about the spiritual situation in the form of allegory. "The whole earth is our hospital Endowed by the ruined millionaire" (Adam), Christ is "the wounded surgeon," the "dying nurse" is the Church; our best cure is to die to the world, our food is the Sacrament of Christ's Sacrifice. In Part V the poet turns to his art and confesses his failure to achieve perfect expression after twenty years.

"Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it" (*Cf* Part II)

It is an increasingly uphill fight, but "For us, there is only the trying." He ends by summarising the lessons of his meditation: What matters in life is not the isolated intense moment "But a life-

time burning in every moment", "Old men ought to be explorers" seeking, through darkness and desolation, union with the hereafter

*The Dry Salvages* is particularly concerned with our apparent failure to obtain wisdom as we grow older. In Part I two contrasted images are evoked—the River Mississippi, "a strong brown god," dark and dangerous—like the untamed potentiality of evil in our hearts, the sea, the universe of life about us, with its bell sounding through the fog like the measured note of God's warning and aid. Part II first laments the futile monotony of the renunciatory life, with the failing pride of age "or resentment at failing powers" (of Yeats). The images used are taken over from Part I. Then the poet discusses more philosophically this problem of seeing meaning in experience. It is superficial to talk glibly of "development", when we had moments of illumination or agony "We had the experience but missed the meaning". Now when we grasp the meaning we revive the experience, but in a different form, and our agonies are at least as "permanent" in this recurrence as our joys. Part III continues the thought. To seek the meaning of life we have to relive it, then we find "That time is no healer," for we are not the same persons as when we started out. Our past dwells in us everchanging.

You shall not think "the past is finished"

Or "the future is before us",

we should not therefore think too precisely on the event, but "Fare forward" Part IV is a prayer

to the Virgin (Stella Maris) to help all voyaging sailors living and dead, and those who loved them Part V rejects the faulty findings of such pseudo-spiritual guides as makers of horoscopes, and psycho-analysts (always fashionable in times of trouble), declaring that

“ to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint ”

Most of us have to rely on our unexpected moments of sudden illumination,

Hints followed by guesses , and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action

To free ourselves from past and future is too hard for us here,

Who are only undefeated  
Because we have gone on trying

*Little Gidding* brings the series of poetic meditations to a climax in which the predominant image of fire signifies the purgation which is the only hope of the soul The first part, based perhaps on a visit to Little Gidding on a fine day in winter, begins by symbolising a moment of joy in the winter of the mind. But whether you came to Little Gidding then or in spring or at night (as Charles I did in defeat in 1646), you would find there humble buildings whose meaning was not on the surface

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid

—to gain maybe one of those moments of illumina-

tion Part II begins with a lyric on the decay of all things human, the death of the four elements, air, earth, water and fire. The theme is then translated into the decay of personal aims and powers by means of a long Dantesque vision in blank-verse triplets

Between three districts whence the smoke arose  
 I met one walking, loitering and hurried  
 As if blown towards me like the metal leaves  
 Before the urban dawn wind unresisting

The spirit is like Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* XV (with 'il viso abbruciato'), but has something too of Arnaut Daniell, Dante's Provençal master in poetry (*Purgatorio* XXVI), of Dante himself, of Mallarmé, and indeed of all who worked "to be of service to the speech of the common people" (*De Vulg Eloq* 1). The poet too identifies himself with this "familiar compound ghost," which warns him of the wretchedness of old age and its self-torments

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
 Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
 Where you must move in measure, like a dancer

Part III begins with a disquisition on the different forms of attachment and detachment, and on the need to avoid fixity

History may be servitude,  
 History may be freedom

The poet then considers the people (on both sides) in the seventeenth century struggle, including

Charles and others who died on the scaffold, and Milton "who died blind and quiet" "We cannot revive old factions," he says, our modern attitudes are the result of both sides Good comes out of evil, and as the pious Dame Julian of Norwich wrote in the fourteenth century

All manner of thing shall be well  
By the purification of the motive  
In the ground of our beseeching

Part IV is a lovely lyric on purgation as the means of redemption by love We must choose between the fire of damnation and the fire of Divine Love Part V reverts to the idea that "The beginning is often the end, And to make an end is to make a beginning," taking as illustration the piece of good writing

" where every word is at home  
Taking its place to support the others  
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
And easy commerce of the old and the new .  
Every poem an epitaph "

—i.e marmoreal in its succinctness yet full of potential suggestion

Mr Eliot is still oppressed by the importance of every action, but whereas his Prufrock shrank from action in cowardly indecision, the poet now accepts the limitations of human knowledge in time and place, while seeking the higher knowledge to which God calls us (as a quotation from the mediæval *Cloud of Unknowing* suggests)

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

The poem and the series end with a recapitulation of key-themes, exploration, final return

When the last of earth to discover  
Is that which was the beginning,

the illuminative moments, "A condition of complete simplicity," the assurance that

All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one

—as in the Mystic Rose of inmost heaven seen by Dante in *Paradiso*, XXX

Mr Eliot has come a long way since *Prufrock*. As a poetic thinker he has grown in stature, passing through impressionism, satire, self-analysis and drama, to a philosophical poetry larger and more integrated than Mr Herbert Read's. He has tried to write an "oblique" poetry in which images clash with great suggestive power, but in him discursive intellect has never lagged far behind emotion, and finally in *The Four Quartets* he has achieved a poetry in which music of sensation and emotion is answered by music of thought, and the paradoxical abstractions of mystical psychology are vitalised by concrete experience. The many-sidedness of his cosmic view involved variety of mood and technique, his genius was shown not so much in inventing this particular scheme, as in using it so as to blend "baroque" lyric, metaphysical wit, irony, symbolism, diverse rhythms, conversational reflection, a plain rhetoric of solemn

self-exhortation, into a noble work of interior vision

The poet who was regarded as the spokesman of a disillusioned generation has become the poet of Christian mysticism. If most of his disciples lacked the fastidious seriousness of his earlier satire, how few of them to-day can follow him into the purgative fires in which, like Arnaut Daniell he shrouds himself, superficially easy to copy, he is, in total effect, inimitable. If Milton had a bad effect on poetic technique, so had he, his influence between the two wars was immense, and was not, like Pound's confined to technique.

If the latter offered in *Mauberley* a clear-cut procedure of self-analysis and social criticism which appealed by its simplicity to minds impatient of romantic veils, nebulous words, confused thought, Mr Eliot crystallised current dissatisfaction with the decaying standards of individualism, however much some might quarrel with his remedies. Their common plea for a literature of scholarly intelligence excited the intelligentsia at a time when the factitious opposition of art and science was bridged in the search for a new synthesis of knowledge and faith. But the cerebral poetry that resulted had little in common with the plain manner advocated by Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) as the product of a scientific mind, and rarely approached the ideal of good writing described in the fifth part of *Little Gidding*.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### METAPHYSICALS AND LEFT-WINGERS

DESPITE strong individual talents, most poetry of the past twenty years has been under strong group-influences. Never before in this country have literary men been so self-conscious, so alive to what is being written on the Continent and in America, so occupied in explaining what they are trying to do and (often) why they are unable to do it—either because society is against them or because of internal maladjustments. They analyse their work as critics do the dead masters. Every morning brings a new thrill—they may awake and find themselves in a new phase. For the first time English poetry (like the modern French) has become an affair of warring cliques, each with its manifesto, periodical and collections, each with its panacea for the declining state of poetry. All this is very amusing and boyish, though somewhat bewildering to the historian of contemporary literature, but if it fosters posturing, pretentiousness and eccentricity, it betokens a lively and serious interest in the problems of art, and suggests that in quantity and in quality our poetry is in no danger of decay. The real danger is rootless eclecticism.

By the end of the twenties the consciousness of a

cleavage between imaginative life and modern social conditions (popularised by Pound, Eliot and Read) was affecting many young intellectuals at the older universities At Cambridge, Dr F R Leavis spoke of a fissure between "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture" which many took to justify an esoteric literature, a flouting of near poetic traditions, and the wildest experiments in novel and older ways of writing For a time Milton was cast down from his throne by Mr Eliot "with singularly little fuss"—though he has since been honourably reinstated, poetry had been on the wrong track ever since the Metaphysicals and Dryden, we must go back to Donne for a poetry capable of expressing the modern spirit, to the Augustans for standards of taste and expression, or look abroad to the direct statement of the French Symbolists Above all, the new poetry must embody "social awareness," the unease of young minds living in a civilisation in catastrophe or transformation That it has done so will be amply plain from this and the following chapter. For the moment I am concerned with two interrelated groups of University poets, whose work became known through such anthologies as *Cambridge Poetry* (1929) and *New Signatures* (1932) The first we may call the School of Wit, the second the School of Romantic Politics (Communist or Liberal).

The School of Wit was never a coterie, but most of those whom we may group thus had subtle, academically trained minds influenced by Donne,

Eliot, Pound, and others as indicated by Mr John Davenport in some amusing lines—

Eliot, Rabelais, Dryden, Donne,  
Bless the bed that I lie on,  
Blake, Rimbaud, Marvell, Voltaire,  
Swift, Joyce, Proust and Baudelaire

The fruit of this reading among the enemies of romance, among intellectual self-dissectors and disturbers of convention, was a cerebral abstractness, a chill hardness, new to adolescent verse. Mr William Empson carried this to the extreme, carrying over from his brilliant critical studies of shades of meaning and seventeenth-century wit (in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral*) a love of closely-patterned word-play whose deliberation made for obscurity without excuse of passion. Here is the opening of one of his poems in *New Signatures* which the editor (Mr Michael Roberts) claimed was “definitely trying to say something to an audience”

The proper scale would pat you on the head  
But Alice showed her pup Ulysses' bough  
Well from behind a thistle, wise with dread ,

And though your gulf-sprung mountains I allow  
(Snow-puppy curves, rose-solemn dado band)  
Charming for nurse, I am not nurse just now.

The obscurity here, we are told, “is due solely to a necessary compression . . . there is no scope for vagueness of interpretation, and its “difficulty” arises from this merit . . . (His poems) do something to remove the difficulties which have stood

between the poet and the writing of popular poetry" Astonishing claim!

Wiser than his editor, Mr Empson knew that his verses could not be popular, and gave notes to *The Gathering Storm* (1940) because "partly they are meant to be like answers to a crossword puzzle, a sort of puzzle interest is a part of the pleasure that you are meant to get from the verse . . . It is clear that you try to guess the puzzle before you turn to the answer. . . The fashion for obscure poetry . . . came in about the same time as the fashion for crossword puzzles, and it seems to me that the revival of puzzle interest in poetry, an old-fashioned thing, has got a bad name merely by failing to know itself and refusing to publish the answers" Alas, when the answer was known, there was little to admire but the author's cleverness

Mr Ronald Bottrall was pedantic in a different way, trying to combine the manners of Pound and Eliot in a mood of world-weariness.

Nightingales, Anangke, a sunset, or the meanest flower  
Were formerly the potentialities of poetry . . .

he tells us, for these he substituted objects from science and engineering

Microscopic anatomy of ephemerides,  
Power-house stacks, girder-ribs, provide a crude base

and though he realised that these are not bred  
Flesh of our flesh, fused in no emotive furnace . . .

he used them constantly in his reflections on the age *The Loosening and Other Poems* (1931) and his

*Festivals of Fire* showed poetic talent smothered by intellect and jargon. In his later work, *Farewell and Welcome* (1945) his prodigious cleverness continues as

“The layers that shale off experience  
Like shavings from a sharpened pencil  
Come floating”

Mr Bottrall was typical of many who took up Eliot's attitude to society without his religious basis “Living within and for ourselves,” setting up a private culture in contempt of common men, taking an extravagant pleasure in the delight of the intellect to feel itself alive, turning fastidiously inward to play with witty comparisons, academic ironies, memories of books, machines and laboratories, all this stultified much poetry and criticism between the wars. Donne and Herbert were educated men, our modern Metaphysicals in their clever sophistication might seem over-educated, unlike Donne and Herbert they often deserve the double condemnation of Dr Johnson, who wrote — “The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear.” Yet they did not always fail, and even their failure was in a sense worth while, for it helped to show the narrow boundary between obscurity and brilliant success, the limitations of a poetry composed in the wits,

and the extent to which scientific, anthropological and literary allusions and terms could justifiably be used in the new poetry. Scarcely a young poet in the decade 1929-1939 was not under the dual influence of T S Eliot and the Metaphysicals. As Mr Gavin Ewart wrote of the former in 1933

He gave us a voice, straightened each limb,  
Set us a few mental exercises  
And left us to our own devices

At first we ran up trees in distraction,  
Mimicked his every action,  
But now are back on earth again  
Sheltered by a gourd and sane

*(New Verse, No 3, May 1933)*

The last line did not always apply, but the rest was apt.

In *New Signatures* (1932) we can see many aspects of rebel-verse at the beginning of the thirties, besides the wit-writing of Mr Empson. A J C Tessimond in *Chaplin* and *La Marche des Machines* used material from the cinema and from machinery in the manner of the Imagists, Julian Bell wrote Augustan satire, John Lehmann was almost Georgian but with a freer range of imagery (*Looking Within* and *To Penetrate that Room*),<sup>v</sup> but the three chief poets, W H. Auden, C Day Lewis and S Spender were propagandist left-wingers, and theirs was the most important influence during the next few years.<sup>v</sup> They turned away from the prevailing introspection and the interest in the isolated individual, they rejected the murky

polarities of Lawrence and the mystical ecclesiasticism of Eliot, and sought a central apprehension of life in an altruistic Utopian idealism which, though superficially Marxian, owed more to Shelley and Morris "Their optimism and vigour came like a breath of fresh air after a generation of self-love and self-disgust, of determinism and frustration

Oh, comrades, let not those who follow after,  
 The beautiful generation that shall spring from our sides—  
 Let them not wonder after the failure of banks,  
 The failure of cathedrals, and the declared insanity of our  
 rulers,  
 We lacked the Spring-like resources of the tiger,  
 Or of plants who strike out new roots to gushing waters

Thus wrote Mr Spender in a mood recalling Wordsworth on the French Revolution

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
 But to be young was very heaven

He and his friends initiated a poetry of hope and action, a romanticism schooled by the recognition of human limitations and by an impersonality arising "not from extreme detachment but from solidarity with others. It is nearer to the Greek conception of good citizenship than to the stoical austerity of recent verse" (M. Roberts). They worked easily "in the material presented by modern civilisation," for they belonged to a generation which "found that seaplanes and mountains, derricks, greyhounds, and jessamine, all excited in them the same lyrical enthusiasm" (Could it be the *same* enthusiasm? Should it? one is

tempted to ask Mr Roberts here unwittingly touches one of their faults, a certain lack of discrimination between types of imagery and their effects) They were well read in general science and economics, in the new psychology, in modern politics, national and international, and if at times they flaunted their "modernity" in a pert and knowing way, each of them had considerable power to fuse incoherent elements of the contemporary situation into witty and passionate poetry

Wystan H Auden, superficially the most talented of the three, was the medicine man of the movement, who diagnosed the diseases of a sick society and, in particular, of its typical middle-class sufferers, with an air now boisterous, now sympathetic. He was a writer with two manners, one cerebral and elliptic, the other spontaneous, overflowing with humour to the verge of doggerel. In the first, closer manner, based on Imagism but clogged by abstractions, grammatical functions were frequently neglected, articles, relatives and auxiliary verbs were dropped, until conciseness produced sometimes a ludicrous and unmusical pidgin-English (e.g. *Poems* (1930) X, XIV). At times inversion, lack of punctuation, the accumulation of far-fetched analogies, brought an obscurity made worse by psychological jargon. Riddling mystification marred much of his early work, and his courageous use of colloquialisms accorded ill with a crabbed tortuousness. On the other hand, his delicate allusiveness triumphed in such a love-lyric

as "For what as easy," while in *Chorus from a Play*, his stoical humanism found a natural affinity to the mood and movement of *O E Wanderer* and *Seafarer* "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle" His advocacy of a balanced life of freedom, love and duty, made him a satirist of contemporary cant and ineffectuality, of the middle-class with its fetishes and merely external graces (XXI, III, IV) In a modern version of *Locksley Hall* he reviewed the condition of England in years of unemployment

Smokeless chimneys, damaged bridges, rotting wharves and choked canals,  
Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on their side across the rails , (XXII)

and the mentality that caused it

Perfect Pater, marvellous Mater Knock the critic down  
who dares—  
Very well, believe it, copy, till your hair is white as theirs

Action alone would save us now

If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try ,  
If we don't, it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die

The revolution, whose imminence played a considerable part in his poetry, was a romantic adventure, the dream of a school- and scout-master, with boys as spies and skirmishers in a war of fortified farms and raided power-stations. *The Orators* with its incoherent jottings was full of this fantasy He loved to play with ambushes, cut communications, sudden calls ("Leave for

Cape Wrath to-night ! ”), messages “ Snatched at the gate and panting read indoors ” It is all very boyish and unreal.

The loose manner used more and more in *The Orators* and *The Dance of Death* was a deliberate departure from the constipated technique of the “ cerebral school ” and an expansion of Eliot’s adaptation of popular song idiom in *Sweeney Agonistes* In *Poems* (IX)

Here am I, here are you ,  
What does it mean ? What are we going to do ?

the aimless unease of the jazz-mind is well conveyed by the stumbling banality of the parody Auden’s success in this manner was limited to satire. *The Dance of Death* (1933) used it to chastise fashionable cults in “ a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them ”

Allied to these popular-song measures were the poems in which Auden emulated the loose structure of the post-Chaucerians In *A Happy New Year* and *Birthday Ode*, Auden approached Skelton’s freedom, and did not always escape doggerel But when he avoided the opposite dangers of ellipsis and slack fluency, he wrote poetry at once Rabelaisian and Byronic, a poetry capable of dignity, yet, in the best sense, popular

After collaborating rather unsuccessfully with Christopher Isherwood in *The Dog beneath the Skin*, Auden did so again in *The Ascent of F6* (1936), a verse-play in which the social implications of the

current craze for mountain-climbing and exploration were satirised and used to reveal the sexual conflict (thwarted filial devotion) and aspiration to action, of a leader in record-breaking. The play is episodic, but it is more theatrical and rich in characters than any of Mr Eliot's plays. Its chief value lies, however, less in the central theme with its symbolism culminating in an obscure phantasmagoria on the mountain-top, than in the brief sketches of types—politician, publicist, radio listeners finding vicarious escape from the worries of urban life.

The eight o'clock train, the customary place,  
 Holding the paper in front of your face,  
 The public stairs, the glass-swing-door,  
 The peg for your hat, the linoleum floor,  
 The office stool and the office jokes  
 And the fear in your ribs that shily pokes  
 Are they satisfied with you?

Auden's skill in selecting illustrations of typical behaviour gives power to his portrayal of people. Later he made diagnoses of real men Pascal, Voltaire, Rimbaud, Melville, which often showed great shrewdness and sympathy. In different mood he expressed stirringly, without heroics, in his ode *Spain* (1937), the ideals of Republicanism. Too much the humanitarian psychologist to be the complete politician, he turned away in *Look, Stranger!* (1936) and *Another Time* (1940) from Marxism to explore primary spiritual needs without the Communist's "rehearsed response". So *Another Time*, though it has traces of tasteless facetiousness (e.g. Miss G.), suggests that love of man for woman

and for humanity is the only stay of a tottering world

All I have is a voice  
 To undo the folded lie,  
 The romantic lie in the brain  
 Of the sensual man in the street  
 And the lie of Authority  
 Whose buildings grope the sky  
 There is no such thing as the State  
 And no one exists alone ,

We must love one another or die

(Sept 1, 1939)

The volume contained some interesting character-sketches, two of them clever and unfair—of Matthew Arnold (xxvii) haunted by his father so that he suppressed his gift for sympathetic observation and became the hollow denouncer of optimism, and of A E Housman, who because he was “Heart-injured in North London”

Deliberately chose the dry as dust,  
 Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer—

One at least is brilliant—on Edward Lear whose self-disgust drove him to nonsense with the result that Words pushed him to the piano to sing comic songs, And children swarmed to him like settlers He became a land

Because he had been living in America since before the War, Mr Auden was more able than most of his contemporaries to consider the problems it involved in the light of eternal values His *New Year Letter* (1941) used Hudibrastic couplets in a manner very different from Samuel Butler or his

own earlier burlesque, it became a conversational medium for the rapid discussion of moral needs against a background of reading in Kierkegaard, Pascal and other mystics. Apparently Auden was approaching a semi-religious position not unlike that found since by another emigré, Aldous Huxley, in *The Perennial Philosophy*. Anarchic quietism took the place of socialist therapeutics, and the remedy for our ills was now "free confession of our sins" and "consciousness of differences"—a reasonable if not very striking development of the gospel of human love which he had always preached.

*For the Time Being* (1945) opened a new field in its two long pieces. The first, *The Sea and the Mirror*, was a commentary on Shakespeare's *Tempest* in a series of monologues and lyrics expressing the attitudes of the characters at the end of the play. Prospero, we find, had

"the power to enchant  
That comes of disillusion What the books can teach me  
Is that most desires end up in stinking ponds,"

but he had to learn that "the way of truth was a way of silence" Antonio is wiser in his ironic contemplation of men, and comments that his very existence forced his brother Prospero into his position as

"our melancholy mentor,  
The grown up man, the adult in his pride,  
Never have time to curl up at the centre  
Never become and therefore never enter  
The green occluded pasture as a child "

The love of the two young people is well

differentiated, and Miranda's song is very beautiful. These ways of human wisdom are contrasted with Caliban's long-winded, worldly-wise and casuistical explanation of it all—as if Shakespeare's savage had turned in modern days into a Bishop Blougram.

Turning from human wisdom to the divine, Auden wrote *For The Time Being*, a Christmas Oratorio on the Nativity, showing the humanity of Joseph, tempted to suspect Mary of infidelity, the political problem of Herod the would-be "liberal" driven to slaughter the Innocents, and the beautiful simplicity of Mary, whose lullaby over her baby is most moving. Following Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Auden again (as in the previous piece) adds a prose disquisition placing the action in a wider setting—this time through a theological meditation by Simeon.

His work during the War showed that Auden did not lose the source of his inspiration by leaving England and Left-wing politics. His range widened, and his thought took on a more positive quality, his freakishness diminished, the dualism of his style was less pronounced. But his manner was still not mature.

When Stephen Spender's *Poems* appeared in 1933 he was hailed as a modern Shelley, another Rupert Brooke. There was point in both comparisons, for he combined an almost "perfectibilist" idealism with introspective sensuousness, and sharpness of image. If he lacked Auden's vitality and wit, he lacked also his tortuousness and garrulity, his display of up-to-date knowledge and worldw-

wisdom. Nor was he ever so nearly the Marxist hot-gospeller, the satiric expositor of other men's social sores. He saw himself as the bourgeois convert to a religion of freedom and equality for which his upbringing had scarcely prepared. Nobody more fitted than he to write a book, *Forward from Liberalism*, since he knew all the difficulties involved. Much of his verse has been concerned with the problem of reconciling individuality with socialism. More introvert than either Auden or Day Lewis, he sank deeper into himself than either. He was essentially lyrical, and, having the courage of his passion, in his first book he ventured out of the fashionable understatement into glowing hyperbole, wedding romantic feeling to revolutionary objectivity. He saw "the created poem" as "a dazzling crystal," and paid much attention to form, though his music was at times defective. He used images of machinery with ease (*The Express*), but his special facility was in natural images which he organised into the feeling of a passage, at times making one image pervade an entire poem. Like the Georgians he contrasted the inconstancy of the human mind with nature's permanence, and explored the levels of the self.

Central "I" is surrounded by "I eating,"  
"I loving," "I angry," "I excreting"

or remarked on the barriers between subject and object, without, however, falling into Georgian subjectivism. Outside the mind he recognised another reality, of time and place. He accepted the

conception of an incomprehensible actuality outside the individual consciousness which should limit the modern imagination, prevent it from beating its wings in the void, and canalise its religious aspirations into social courses

The barriers between persons and classes afflicted him like wounds He watched the unemployed loungers with pity, and refused to conceal the miseries of beggars in artistic patterns of "draped despairs," but protested against the wrongs of the poor Pity rather than satire was his social weapon, and at times he touched sentimentality He is like Shelley—and Shelley at his more ineffectual—when he asks

How was it that works, money, interest, building, could ever  
hide

The palpable and obvious love of man for man

He looked forward to the revolution as a heavenly  
illumination

Watch the admiring dawn explode like a shell  
Around us, dazing us with its light, like snow

His technical accomplishment, sparkling imagery and lyrical fervour were at their height in his invocation of youth to rebel ("Oh young men . ." XXII)

More drawn to foreign poets than were his friends, Mr Spender translated Holderlin and Rilke (both of whom, it is significant, were intensely *private* poets of metaphysical profundity) and studied modern Spanish poets remarkable for their economy and allusiveness Such reading and the

stress of events after the Spanish war moved him towards a barer, more introspective, at times more didactic style, as he cast into verse his analysis of his position as lover, citizen, revolutionary. Much of this poetry is incompletely fused (*The Universal Chaos, Two Armies*) ; his occasional verse lacks Auden's humour and pregnancy , his exact self-centredness grew more and more analytical in *The Still Centre* (1939), *Ruins and Visions* (1942) and *Poems of Dedication* (1946).

He did not think it possible to " write truthfully about the heroism as well as the fears and anxiety of to-day " , eschewing " the utilitarian heroics of the moment," he shrank into " the fortress of my final weakness," or rather, he laid it bare with sensitive courage, for all to see the breaches caused by the pains of politics and love, and the flag of pity and hope still flying tremulously aloft

As he lost his first short-lived assurance the brightness of his imagery, with its references to mirrors, sunlight, water, leaves and birds, became involved with abstractions, and the line-by-line movement of his irregular verse more deliberate and weighty He is a poet of self-mistrust, but his work, though lacking now in thrust and lilt, has a beautiful clear integrity

Of the three, Mr Cecil Day Lewis, while more limited in range, has developed most homogeneously to maturity His three early volumes were attempts at the long poem, each portraying a complex experience in several stages, unity being dependent on the balance of the parts

"The central theme of this poem is the single mind," wrote Mr Lewis of *Transitional Poem* (1929). Here there is no final effect of poetic unity, and in describing his "pursuit of single-mindedness" the poet did not sufficiently distinguish the four categories of experience (metaphysical, ethical, psychological, artistic) underlying the structure. Diffuse and repetitive though it is, however, the book contains some charming lyrics, marked by a mild Metaphysical influence, considerable wit, and a notable clarity of self-analysis. The poet is one of those to whom romantic nature-worship could give no peace from the mind's "own forked speculation," though if he were "to brick up ambition,"

I could leave wonder on the latch  
And with a whole heart watch  
The calm declension of an English year

He has no sympathy with "the intellectual Quixotes of the age, prattling of abstract art." At times he is content with a merely discontinuous experience, but again he seeks to "integrate"

A million selves, and where disorder ruled,  
Straddle a chaos and beget a world

He knows love and its treachery, is swayed this way and that by his impulses, but finally leaves speculation and introspection to "bite the crust of things," for singlemindedness dwells, not in assumed detachment or the study of the unconscious, but where

household stuff, stone walls, mountains and trees  
Placard the day with certainties

Similarly, in his artistic life, the poetic impulse which at first, like the Word of God, stood remote, free from actuality's "wolf and worm," must be made flesh, come into touch with life, and now

Wrenching a stony song from a scant acre  
The Word still justifies its Maker

*From Feathers to Iron* (1931) carried further Mr Day Lewis's spiritual autobiography "We take but three steps from feathers to iron," Keats wrote, and the title suggests growth from a theoretical to an actual understanding of life The theme is the experience of marriage and parenthood Love is not enough without children

Here is love's junction, no terminus,  
He arrives at girl or boy

Once "Beauty's end is in sight," new dimensions are added to the love of man and wife, who have been "Two years marooned on self-sufficiency" The lovely lyric, "Twenty weeks near past," is a pæan of fertility , one which follows shortly, "But think of passion and pain," illustrates in its use of railway terminology to suggest the anguish of birth, the errors of taste which in these poets are occasional consequences of the deliberate application of a "mechanical" theory of poetic diction The poet looks forward to fatherhood, hoping that it may end the "indeterminate quarrel between a fevered head and a cold heart" His period of waiting is occupied with poems to mother and child, sparkling with wit and fancy, sometimes passionate, sometimes tastelessly ingenious In the last days, "numb

with crisis, cramped with waiting," the poet accumulates images of mountaineering blasting, revolution, while gnawing fears intrude into his memory of past comradeship in "places not doubting to revisit,"

*But if to see new sunlight on old haunts  
Swallows and men come back but if come back  
From lands but if beyond our view but if  
She dies? Why then, here is a space to let,  
The owner gone abroad, never returning*

At last, after both have explored the extremes of pain and fear, comes deliverance *From Feathers to Iron* is more than a series of lyrics, it is one developing experience seen from many sides It has the same sort of unity as a sequence like *Modern Love*, and it is the first attempt in verse at an analysis of marriage in its relationship to parentage If it lacks the profundity of Shakespeare's sonnets on Breed, if the disjunction of "fevered head" and "cold heart" leaves many traces, the cool clarity of Mr Lewis's lyricism is a striking achievement

In *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933) the poet came more fully under the double spell of Auden and G Manley Hopkins How potent the sway of Hopkins on Auden himself was at times may be seen in a poem by the latter in *New Country*

Me, March, you do with your movements master and rock  
With wing-whirl, whale-wallow, silent budding of cell,  
Like a sea-god the communist orator lands at the pier

How Hopkins would have smiled at the third line! Mr Lewis, too, wielded the instruments of the Catholic poet in the service of a very different

rapture For here the single mind served the social ideal of Communism

The poem is in four parts Beginning with a bold reminiscence of *The Windhover*, he invokes his "kestrel joy, O hoverer in wind", he is searching "beyond the railheads of reason" for a "magnetic mountain"—that is truth Proposing to follow his friends, Wystan (Auden) and Rex (Warner), along the political road to it, he surveys (in Part Two) some reactionary types the clinging mother, the conventional schoolmaster, the priest, the domestic man "heart-deep in earth" Part Three exposes more open enemies of progress—the flattering spell of love, press sensations and press education

Professor Jeans spills the beans  
Dean Inge tells you a thing  
A man in a gown gives you the low-down ,

the religion of science, false romance Finally, in a series of lyrics, he extols a social effort governed by the twofold conception of man as soarer and earth-bound

Of specifically Marxist doctrine there is almost nothing, the poet was concerned with ideals, not institutions, and although sometimes his thought and technique were too much affected by "Wystan's," his talent gained a new power by his linking of his own inner problem with that of England, for the new civilisation to which he aspired is one in which "Feeling, head, and heart agree" Mr Lewis's weakness was still facility, ideas and images flowed free but tenuous

Since then he has gained in economy and force  
 The self-consciousness with which he used the  
 imagery of modern industry and transport—like  
 a townsman aggressive among the rustics—has  
 vanished, he writes more as a countryman, with  
 a delight in the lines of landscape (ploughed fields,  
 wolds, cloud forms) and in effects of air, which  
 makes his verse clear though pale

In *Poems in Wartime* (1940) and *Word Over All*  
 (1943) he almost reverts to the Georgian mood

For me there is no dismay  
 Though ills enough impend  
 I have learned to count each day  
 Minute by breathing minute (*The Poet*)

But though he shrinks from his duty to write poetry  
 on the war, being struck “Dumb as a rooted rock”  
 by the sorrows of the time, yet he has something to  
 say to the war-torn decade It emerges, not in  
*The Assertion*, where the declaration

Now is the time we assert  
 To their face that men are love

sounds forced, but in the occasional poems  
 celebrating moments of civilian warfare (*Watching*  
*Post*, *The Stand To*), in his dry reflections on war’s  
 ironies (*Where are the War Poets?*, *Angel*), and in  
 his recognition of the good and evil in all humanity,  
 as in *Lidice*

The pangs we felt from your atrocious hurt  
 Promise a time when even the killer shall see  
 His sword is aimed at his own naked heart

He has kept his mastery of the love-song (*Jig, Hornpipe*), and of the tender poem that traces the effect of love on the personality (*The Lighted House, The Album*) Far now from the propagandist mood of *The Magnetic Mountain*, he regrets, not any loss of belief

We doubt the flame that once we knew ,  
Heroic words sound all untrue  
As love-lies in a dream (*The Rebuke*)

but the wildness, the raptures of youth

Where are the sparks at random sown,  
The spendthrift fire, the holy fire ?  
Who cares a damn for truth that's grown  
Exhausted haggling for its own  
And speaks without desire ?

Day Lewis's craftsmanship, already shown in lyric and in the surging narrative of the Spanish war, *The Loss of the Nabara*, has strengthened with age He has never strayed far from the tradition of Lovelace, Marvell and Tennyson, and his translations from Virgil have increased a natural elegance which makes him, with his chaste reflectiveness, the Blunden of the "moderns"

The influence of Auden during the 'thirties was great enough to rival that of T S Eliot. Enterprising periodicals such as *New Verse* (1933) contained many excellent versions of the new ellipsis or the higher doggerel But the essence of Auden's poetry lay in his blend of seriousness and flippancy, and few imitators could snatch success out of obscurity or absurdity All I can do here is to

survey briefly three poets independent enough to stand by their own moods and techniques. Many young writers attracted to Auden, Day Lewis and Spender by their political leanings found themselves left in the lurch when the triumvirate broke up and developed other interests. But Mr Louis MacNeice shared the liberal humanitarianism which was the real inspiration of the movement, Mr Rex Warner, one of the original inner circle, obviously regarded poetry as an expression of his private interests, and Mr Julian Symons was not a follower of Auden's ideas but reveals the dilemma of the liberal mind when it lacked the faith in humanity that sustained these others through disillusionment, war and maturity.

In Mr MacNeice's *Poems* (1935) we find an acute observation and sympathy with the dispossessed mingled with "The hard cold fire of the northerner" (he is from Belfast), moods of ironic detachment alternating with studies in irresponsibility which suggest a desire to turn the blind eye on current problems, to "escape with my dog, on the far side of the Fair". He sees the evils of introspective analysis when in his *Ode* for his future son he writes

Therefore, let not my son, halving the truth  
 Be caught between jagged edges,  
 And let him not falsify the world  
 By taking it to pieces,  
 The marriage of Cause and Effect, Form and Content,  
 Let him not put asunder

He can catch the bright moment and write witty

or seductive phrases of sensuousness and fancy But MacNeice is a classicist, as his admirable translation of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus proves, and a critic who has written our best analysis of modernist technique (*Modern Poetry* (1938)) He believes in a reconciliation of tradition and experiment " My own prejudice is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to personal impressions" (*Modern Poetry*, p 198) These sociable interests came out in *Plant and Phantom* (1941) and *The Springboard* (1944), where he showed himself a perceptive spectator of human foibles, presenting in *The Conscript*, *The Mixer*, *The Libertine*, *The Satirist*, a series of ethical illustrations owing something to Auden but without his jesting savagery or piercing acumen Aware of man's unique position in nature as " a conscious Hoping and therefore despairing creature" (*Explorations*), he is glad that

Our end is our own to be won by our own endeavour  
And held on our own terms

Considering his times he is deprecating and defeatist as he imagines the Liberal poets superseded by

" The tight-lipped technocratic Conquistadores "

Yet " Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind

the posters" he sees the importance of "the Kingdom of individuals,"

The incorruptible souls who work without a commission,  
 The pairs of hands that are peers of hearts, the eyes that  
     marry with eyes,  
 The candid scholar, the unselfish priest, the uncomplaining  
     mothers of many,  
 The active men who are kind, the contemplative who give,  
 The happy-go-lucky saint and the peace-loving buccaneer

The clarity of his vignettes of Ireland does not desert him in wartime England. He is a poet of observation with a genial, shrewd humanity. As his B B C plays show, his peril lies in the facility which is the obverse of his fertility.

The *Poems and Contradictions* of Rex Warner (1937, revised 1945) show greater power and precision within a narrower range. Allegorical novels rather than verses are Warner's chief work. His poetry is that of a Georgian under the influence of Hopkins

How sweet only to delight lambs and laugh by streams,  
 innocent in love wakening to the early thrush,  
 to be awed by mountains, and feel the stars friendly,  
 to be a farmer's boy, to be far from battle

he feels, and though he thinks it necessary to live "as one in strict training for a desperate war" (the war for revolutionary ideals), he is a poet of air and birds and the analysis of love. In *Chough*, *Mallard*, *Dipper*, and other pieces he delineates with considerable skill the airborne activities of these alien creatures without drawing from

them moral or mystical lessons (as Hopkins used to do)

The longtail lunging and lingering through the air,  
 a mouse, rush-tail, a ball, wool-feather, peeper,  
 looking so sharp through cherry blankets of down,  
 the doll-face, easy on the flying twig's trapeze,  
 pink and white in the light, as light as a blowing seed,  
 is meek in merriment, all careless of earth's bitterness  
 the bare-tooth coming, bark-biting of the winter wind  
*(Longtailed Tit )*

His sequence of nineteen sonnets, *Contradictions* (1937-40), traces the growth and decline of love from the very womb, and prenatal life and birth were never so forcefully described as here (I-II). He traces infancy (III), childhood (IV), the growth of fancy (V), self-consciousness (VI), the alternations of desire and flight in love (X, XI) with copious energy, and the last four poems of jealousy, struggle and memory are also among the best sonnets of our time Alliteration, catalogues, streams of metaphors, are here used, as rarely among Hopkins's imitators, with a sense of their powers in verse that does not merely give back the master's voice

With Julian Symons we are back in the social struggle, but far from the cheerful zest of MacNeice and Warner Mr Symons was not one of the Auden group, nor did he accept its solutions for social problems In some respects he was like those victims of the middle-class débâcle whom Auden analysed with rigour and Spender with pity He shows the decline of Left-wing influence

just before the war, the difficulties of the "isolated individual" conscious of his separation, the "darkness of the soul" which afflicted many intellectuals who rejected didactic and propagandist art but could not yet achieve the faith which we shall see inspiring the writers of the New Apocalypse

In his periodical *Twentieth Century Verse* (No 8), Mr Symons expressed views which are of use to us in assessing his poetry — "Poetry has social value, but his own poetry should have no social value to a poet" "Art is to the artist an autobiographical game" "In poetry the factual is to be preferred to the abstract, words to music, the real to the ideal Poetry creates legend, and that is generally a good thing for the poet to live inside his own legend is almost always a bad thing" He thus rejects all political views of art, which he regards as an escape-mechanism, as he wrote in another essay (*Now*, Vol 3) "Art is for the artist never more than a means of expression, involuntary, personal, subjective and useless"

Playing the autobiographical game, in *Confusions about X* (1938) and *The Second Man* (1943), Mr Symons certainly tends to live "inside his own legend" His is a divided mind, as the symbolic figures of the first book suggest, and X is the mysterious many-sided incoherence of his aims and deeds—the fissure in the soul

He is the winding music that I choose,  
My ravelled sleeve, my polyphonic wrongs,  
The black to-morrow that I never play

The poet regards himself as one of a doomed race

All your faces are like mine, you are  
Puppets like me in the iron fist of money

(*Dedication*)

He has grown up aware of the evil in society

I saw without emotion and without surprise  
The splendid and remote ideal  
Not wished, the shabby and the real  
Accepted, the commonplace preferred to the wise

(*Garden Poem*)

But he is too involved in the evil to rebel, too clear-sighted for "the uncomplicated faith, The raised-fist marching, and the missionary death" So he withdraws sadly into the isolation which makes bleak his second volume (e.g. *Ventnor, Pub.*). He moves among men and cities with a "furious individual heart" Love is only a drug

Too many questions without answers which  
Make the hand flutter or the eyelid twitch  
Our compensation is the sense of touch

(*Whitsun, 1940*)

"The poet," he declares, "in society as it is now constituted, has no 'duty', the poet is not of necessity concerned with the alteration of society, he may accept or reject or remain indifferent to the effects of war" Yet the apology rings hollow, his poems prove that he felt responsible—and ineffectual Like the hero of Clough's *Amours*

*de Voyage* he was impotent because he had no beliefs

If I could give power to  
My burning thoughts ! This ink turn acid and the pen  
Become a gun, points against the murderers  
If I could extinguish the voice that says  
*Man can endure corruption and be happy*

Sensitive, sincere, blaming himself for clinging to the amenities of a decadent civilisation ("I still desire it"), Symons in 1943 was one of "The depressed who are also the defeated" because he could not will the changes that he saw coming over the world—nor actively oppose them. His poetry, so self-engrossed and full of "the pain of being alive," is yet firm and lucid and entirely adequate to its purpose, *i.e.* to "convey to us sharply, though within a narrow range, the experience of his own time as it was felt by a man of acute sensibility"

## CHAPTER NINE

### SURREALISM, THE NEW APOCALYPSE, ETC

FROM Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Auden's *Spain* the predominant trend of poetry was one of social comment, with the poet seeking to unite himself to some order of earthly or other-worldly life so as to be the good citizen of a commonwealth—in being or to come Poetry might be introvert or extravert in manner, but it assumed the existence of a standard of values outside the writer, and the duty of art to pass moral judgments

Such an attitude could not satisfy the imaginations of all poets even in a time of slump, social unrest, and drift towards war , and it is not surprising that the 'thirties saw the rise of authors hostile to political poetry who solved their æsthetic and spiritual problems in other ways Some of them, who approximated in mood and technique to the Georgian manner, have already been mentioned Others will be dealt with in the next chapter Here I wish to discuss two groups of writers whose work is related, and especially significant for any account of the psychological attitudes behind recent verse

Surrealism arrived late in this country. On the Continent it was an offshoot of a queer cult called Dadaism which crystallised in 1916 in the middle of the first World War, and on both sides of the

Atlantic Dadaism was a protest against the pretended standards in art and life of a world not made safe for artists, its members, among them Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, André Breton, Philippe Soupault, carried to extreme lengths the fantastic irrationality which had made Gérard de Nerval lead a lobster about Paris at the end of a blue ribbon, and had produced the delirious *Chants de Maldoror* of Lautréamont (1869). The cult of deliberate nonsense (often obscene and sacrilegious) found favour for a short time in Paris and Berlin in the 'twenties. Dadaism (meaning "Hobby-horse") passed into Surrealism when André Breton and Philippe Soupault discovered (through the former's study of Freud) that apparent nonsense, if written or delivered in "a monologue poured out as rapidly as possible, over which the subject's critical faculty has no control"—would throw much light on the subconscious life, and be a vivid, picturesque flow of images typical of the individual temperament. *The Magnetic Fields* (1921), written in this way by these two men in collaboration was the first work of Surrealism proper, and the word was defined as a kind of waking dream-state, "Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought." Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all æsthetic or moral preoccupation." Breton, a doctor, was fascinated by the psychological value of this process, others regarded it as a

serious contribution to art, Mr David Gascoyne in his *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (1936) has given many examples of it in painting and literature.

The movement attracted only perfunctory derision in this country until about 1930, but in 1933 translations and original pieces (mostly by David Gascoyne) were printed in the hospitable pages of *New Verse*.

A section from Gascoyne's *And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis* will serve to illustrate the method

there is an explosion of geraniums in the ballroom of the hotel  
 There is an extremely unpleasant odour of decaying meat  
 arising from the depetaled flower growing out of her ear  
 her arms are like pieces of sandpaper  
 or wings of leprous birds in taxis  
 and when she sings her hair stands on end  
 and lights itself with a million little lamps like glow-worms  
 you must always write the last two letters of her christian name  
 upside down with a blue pencil (*New Verse*, 5th Oct 1933)

The passage is more connected than much of this writing, the aims of which seem to be to express the unconscious fears of the author, and to startle the reader by the juxtaposition of disparate images

Mr Roger Roughton's review, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, ran for ten numbers in 1936-7, and a Surrealist exhibition was held in London in 1936, but British commonsense gave pure Surrealism only a short life, though important traces of its passing still remain. Mr Gascoyne, despite his long poem *The Symptomatic World*, was never completely under the influence, and by 1942 he could write

"I feel that poetry of the magical category—

product of sheer imagination, unrestricted by pure design and untempered by the wisdom of disillusionment—may be more stimulating, more immediately satisfying to write, but in the long run is probably less rewarding, less consoling, than that resulting from conflict between the instinctive poetic impulse and the impersonal discipline of realistic ‘sense’ ”

His later poetry was almost aggressively “normal” in attitude and style. In *Walking at Whitsun* he cried

But light!

O cleanse with widespread flood of rays the brain’s  
Oppressively still sickroom, wherein brood  
Hot festering obsession, and absolve  
My introspection’s mirror of such stains  
As blot its true reflection of the world (1940)

The fault of Surrealism lay in banishing from poetry all elements of mind but the one least capable of communication. In rebelling against the intellectual privacy of Empson and Bottrall it substituted an emotional privacy of even more enigmatic nature; the meaning of Surrealist art is often a secret known only to the artist’s psychiatrist. Occasionally it may produce a poem organised (like *Kubla Khan*) by implicit craftsmanship of dream into a living unity, but in examples such as Hugh Sykes Davies’s Poem *In the sump of the old tree* (*Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, No 7, Nov 1936) or Gascoyne’s *Systematic World*, one suspects that the conscious mind has been at work shaping the material.

In the poetry of Mr Dylan Thomas, whose prose shows more narrowly the Surrealist influence, the "shaping spirit of imagination" can be clearly seen. Mr Thomas has explained the process:

"I let an image be made emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical force I possess, let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make of the third image out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. The life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image, the life must come out of the centre, an image must be born and die in another, and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions."

(Quoted by C D Lewis, *The Poetic Image*, p 122.)

Few poets have described their methods so intelligently. The poem is organic in that its imagery moves with the emotional flow, but this flow is not, as in "Metaphysical" poetry, a progressive union of emotion with thought, and the movement is frankly centrifugal, the poem a kind of Catherine wheel whirling off sparks, though this figure is inadequate to suggest the full process since the "sparks" or images interact on one another. Indeed they often seem to take command over the original impulse and twist it in their own direction as they divert or contradict each other. Words breed words, their intelligible content is secondary to their individual associations, and

these often spring directly from the poet's subconscious, for "Poetry must drag further into the clear nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise" (*New Verse*, October 1934). It does not follow, as Mr Thomas thought, that "the more subjective a poem, the clearer the narrative line," and Surrealism had proved the fallacy. Because his poetry is not drawn firmly round a centre, it is frequently broken, faint or fuzzy at the circumference. Yet Thomas has usually had a strong sense of external form, he sees poetry as "the physical and mental task of constructing a formally water-tight compartment of words, preferably with a main moving column." Consequently there is at times a strange conflict between the iridescent incalculability of his imagery and the rigid precision of his verse-forms.

Dylan Thomas was never purely Surrealist, but his verse has always been mainly concerned with direct and indirect sex-influences in love, growth, and religion, and dense with morbid symbols of repression.

In old man's shank one-marrowed with my bone,  
And all the herrings smelling in the sea,  
I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail  
Wearing the quick away

Close-packed with fantasy and murky reverberation, his work owed something to Hopkins and Joyce, but his verbal inventiveness lacks their assurance. Some of the 18 Poems (1934), however, are intelligible enough (e.g. 4, 5, 9), and the ten religious sonnets in Twenty-five Poems (1936) are a powerful

interpretation of the life of Christ in sexual terms, replete with symbols, puns, ellipsis, neologisms  
Thus, on the Crucifixion —

This was the tree, Jack Christ, each minstrel angle  
Drove in the heaven-driven of the nails  
Till the three-coloured rainbow from my nipples  
From pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked world  
I by the tree of thieves, all glory's sawbones  
Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute,  
And by this blowclock witness of the sun  
Suffer the heaven's children through my heartbeat

(Sonnet 8)

*The Map of Love* (1939), consisting mainly of Surrealist stories in prose, had verses suggesting that Mr Thomas was trying to write a poetry which would be like music in its drift of images

She makes for me a nettle's innocence,  
And a silk pigeon's guilt in her proud absence,  
In the molested rocks the shell of virgins,  
The frank closed pearl, the sea-girl's lineaments  
Glint in the staved and siren-printed caverns,  
Is maiden in the shameful oak, omens  
Whalebed and bulldance, the gold bush of lions  
Proud as a sucked stone, and huge as sandgrains

Does this intoxicated fancy mean anything? The poet at least thought he had a duty to write, and rated himself when he failed to do so

To take to give is all, return what is hungrily given  
Puffing the pounds of manna up through the dew to heaven,  
The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft

“The lovely gift of the gab” he certainly had, and this brought dangers, including an unbalanced

delight in the mere sound of words Mr Thomas's mastery of verbal melody grew rapidly. At first he built up his poems painfully phrase by phrase, with too much use of gradus epithet and parallelism between line and line This gave a slow and ponderous effect which, oddly enough, influenced his followers more than his later rhythmical freedom (*cf* Lawrence Durrell's *The Sonnet of Hamlet*) But in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), although occasionally the image-mosaic still produces a fragmentary effect, remarkable skill is shown in complicated verse-forms which may, as in *Vision and Prayer* (one of those shaped-poems beloved of George Herbert), be the result of deliberate fancy, or may, as in *On the Marriage of a Virgin*, combine interplay of image with hint of advancing emotion —

No longer will the vibrations of the sun desire on  
 Her deepsea pillow where once she married alone,  
 Her heart all ears and eyes, lips catching the avalanche  
 Of the golden ghost who ringed with his streams her mercury  
 bone,  
 Who under the lids of her windows hoisted his golden luggage,  
 For a man sleeps where fire leapt down and she learns through  
 his arm  
 That other sun, the jealous coursing of the unrivalled blood

*Poem in October* is as simple as Blunden, *Paper and Sticks* and *The Hunchback in the Park* are fresh ballads, *Fern Hill* is a lovely idyl of childhood memories full of Welsh turns of phrase and rhythm which remind us that the poet's prolific imagery is Celtic and its frequent poignant clarity is Celtic too, e.g. in the fantastic *Ballad of the Long-Legged Bairn*

Obscurity and incoherence still abound, as in *Into her Lying Down Head*, where the superbly elaborate first strophe with its thronging images of love-making is followed by an inchoate stream of half-formed jealous fancies Dylan Thomas shows us Surrealism emerging on the surface and coming under the sway of conscious art His poetry surprises by an excess which is sometimes fine His fertility is prodigious and needs careful tending , his fire burns too furiously, but he has brought back into favour a glow and fervour absent for many years Perhaps he will have the intellectual power and the control to fulfil his ideal —

“ Out of the inevitable conflict of images—inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war—I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem ”

The shortcomings of Surrealism, long apparent to most people outside the charmed circle, became clear to a number of young men who, in 1938, formed a new group with the sounding title “ The New Apocalypse.” Among them were Nicholas Moore, J F Hendry, G. S Fraser, Henry Treece, who expounded and illustrated their aims in two collections of prose and verse, *The New Apocalypse* (1939) and *The White Horseman* (1941), as well as in their individual volumes Articles by Hendry in the first collection and Fraser in the second make clear the new point of view

Admitting the value in Surrealism of what

Mr Herbert Read had termed "the effort to realize some of the dimensions and characteristics of man's submerged being," the group denied (wrote Fraser) "Surrealism's own denial of man's right to exercise conscious control, either of his political and social destinies, or of the material offered to him, as an artist, by his subconscious mind. It recognises . . . that the intellect and its activity in willed action is (*sic*) part of the living completeness of man, just as the formal element is part of the living completeness of art." The subconscious "is a rubbish heap as well as a treasure island" Surrealism was a mechanical philosophy , Apocalypse would be organic, and would seek (in Hendry's words) "not merely the juxtaposition of images not commonly juxtaposed, but the recognition, the communication of organic experience, experience with personal shape, experience which (however wild and startling in content) is a formal whole." It would maintain "the right of the artist . . . to create myth" (Fraser), i.e to make of his poetry a little world of sustained and recurrent images, which might be drawn from his subconscious or from folk-lore or from other literature The title New Apocalypse was taken from the Book of Revelations which they considered a notable example of this kind of myth-making

Apocalypse, we are told, is a poetry of the *whole man*, for whom "Present is but an aspect of past, and future but a development of present , myth and history are but two ways of explaining one life-

process, prophecy is the next step towards that state of godhead to which man's desire for completeness points" (H. Treece, *How I see Apocalypse*, 1946)

"The political position of such a movement is clearly Anarchic, an antidote to left-wing Audenism as much as to right-wing Squirearchy—especially Anarchic of the sort outlined in Herbert Read's *Philosophy of Anarchism*, that is, a mode of living in which equity replaces justice, and in which natural law takes over from man-made law (including Marxism, Capitalism, Fascism and eventually Christianity as we see it practised to-day)" (*ibid.*)

Much of this suggests a return to romantic individualism, to Shelley and even Byron (recalling his "Poetry is the sense of a former world and of a future"), in revolt against the cult of the machine, the mass, factual observation, the direction of art to limitedly political and social ends. At the same time some of these poets are still misled by assertions made long ago by Mr Eliot and Mr Read which seemed to ignore the immediate responsibility of the writer to his audience, and their admiration for Blake and Kafka, Donne and Hopkins helps them to justify obscurity. On the whole, however, they are more intelligible than their immediate predecessors, and their insistence on the poet's need to develop along his own lines, together with effect of the War, has been to foster their individual qualities.

Mr J. F. Hendry's *The Bombed Happiness* (1942) and *The Orchestral Mountain* (1943) were two books

of promise in which reaction against the unselective use of imagery typical of Surrealism was well illustrated. The second collection, a "symphonic elegy" in which the poet sought to transmute a personal grief into aesthetic experience was particularly striking. Occasionally, as in his verses on Hyde Park, he is simple as a Georgian

Fragile as the liberty of birds  
 Orators build their cloudy words  
 Where children on a lake of thunder  
 Sail the white ships of wonder

Elsewhere, as in "Persephone! Persephone!" he tries to see new life stirring below chaos

Her fingers break me a star and the seabirds  
 They break me the moon in icy coins,

Violins sawn through, sawdust words  
 Awash in the tides of the underworld

In the broken city, still in a gale,  
 The broken heart is a broken jail,

Breaking from dark subconscious earth  
 A river of leaves whispering in the sun  
 "Persephone! Persephone!"

This illustrates his careful selection of images which may serve as symbols of states of mind. For the most part they follow one another singly, they lack the interplay characteristic of Dylan Thomas, and this makes for success in such a poem as "Living is a drama . . ." where they are linked by exposition or autobiography, or in "Standing beside the wind . . ." where they are near enough to common experience to be integrated into the essentially

simple emotion of the poem At his best he attains through physical imagery a metaphysical and mystical conception of unity between man and nature, death and life, love, the beloved and the spirit of the universe ("If now I wept again . . ." "So I saw her soul the other night," "This burning orb of the world . . ."); and the effect of his symbols of light and ice and water and stars, etc., may be summed up in the lines —

Think how, when these shapes are seen and known  
We may see outlines only, not the substance,  
As when through eyes half-closed, or in a trance,  
The design and not the vase itself is seen ,  
Think how light springs into shape upon a screen

For Mr Hendry the Apocalyptic writer is truly *vates*

Mr Nicholas Moore, editor of *New Poetry* and author of *A Wish in Season* (1941), *The Island and the Cattle* (1941), *The Cabaret, the Dancer, the Gentleman* (1942) and *The Glass Tower* (1945), writes at a lower level of intensity and on more themes At first, as in *Poem in Time of Ravens* and *Prayer to Nobody*, he imitated Dylan Thomas, but moved more freely under Auden's wing (*Memorial Sonnet* and *You look like history*), for his strength is chiefly in the simply-flowing reflective lyric against a background of war Hence his poems for Priscilla are charming and witty, and he clearly expounds his sympathies

The wind blows This is my fable I, the poet, mad  
With my own misery, and man's, am sad  
For all the world's daughters, the young with a star,  
The old who had never yet got there,  
And for all men, the mad, the wicked, the glad

*(The Ruin and the Sun )*

He sees the irony of war, when

The statesmen we have dreaded are our heroes,  
The laws we strove against our soundest hope

(*The Dog's Days*)

His symbolism sometimes leaves us wondering whether it has much meaning (*Buzzing around with a Bee*), and he writes too facilely and externally, though he tries to remember the integrity of poetry

Still the one tower stands,  
The word clothed in its fashions, the design  
Changing but constant that makes up its rhyme  
Against the time for all good sailors sailing

(*Yesterday's Sailors*)

Mr Moore frequents the lower slopes of the orchestral mountain with a muse that is not too good for human nature's daily food

Mr Henry Treece exemplifies a third aspect of Apocalypse, its interest in myth and legend. Another Welshman, he wrote at first (in *38 Poems*, 1940) under Thomas's influence

I have shrunk startled at the scream of moths  
In autumn ivy, have tottered as with stealth  
The pauper wren, wrapped in my woolly blood,  
Knocked at my heart for comfort in the cold

But he followed Herbert Read's advice to him to prune his work, and turned away from the elaborate style and the neologisms of Hopkins, believing that "the decorative (and hence inorganic) Hopkins cult has had to die" after being taken up by followers "whose necessity was not Hopkins's necessity, who, like Auden and Rex Warner, had to prop up the mouldering structure with doses of

Marxism to make it stand" (*How I see Apocalypse*, 1946, p 8) War, he tells us, taught him "sincerity, sympathy, and one way of Christ," and a style "more direct, . . . less liable to forego the straight statement for the sake of a colourful image" To be Apocalyptic means to him

"apprehending the multiplicity of both Inner and Outer worlds, anarchic, prophetic, whole and balanced in the way a man becomes whole and balanced when he has known black as well as white, death as well as life, kindness as well as cruelty, madness as well as sanity, and all the other paradoxes and opposites in his own nature as well as in the world about him"

Seeking "a new romanticism, a broader Humanism," he found his vehicle in simple verse-forms, in folklore and images drawn from Celtic myth In *The Black Seasons* (1945) we see him approach Yeats in the eclogue *The Heroes*, and the faery world of *The Lost Ones*

A red wood treading to the edge of time,  
To the islands that tremble in the edge  
Of the dying earth Back to the Isles  
Where the red folk lived and red blades sang

Yeatsian too is his interest in the phases of human life (*Three Steps for a Poet*) and the wasting of passion, e.g. in Ophelia who

watched the pale boy kiss a bone  
And knew then that his love was gone

And opened her clenched hand to see  
The button that let madness flee

There is a refreshing clarity here and in his ballads,  
*e.g.* that of the feardulled boy and the heartlost  
 Princess sitting in old age together

O bleak the wind and cold the fire,  
 And still the summer peewit's call ,  
 Two wanderers sit as night draws near  
 And stare across the empty hall      (*Sad Song* )

His images have the precision and suggestiveness of fairytale, as in the stone head, the sword and the witch of *Relics* , and he uses flashes of contrast which embody well the paradoxes he appreciates in human nature and all life For him the poet is a bard and a singer

O Purge of God

By shroud of pestilence make pure the mind,  
 Strike dead the running panther of desire  
 That in despair the poem put on wings,  
 That letting out the viper from the veins  
 Man rock the mountain with his two bare hands !  
 (*Prayer in Time of War* )

It is clear from the work of these and other Apocalyptic writers that no reader need be put off by the portentousness of their title In fact they do not constitute a group with a common technical programme , they are at one only in some of their dislikes, in their claim for poetry as a strictly personal expression, and in a tendency to anarchism which does not make them propagandist or political poets, but draws them to social and philosophical ideas in general. This freedom from stereotyped doctrine and method justifies us perhaps in mentioning in this chapter three other poets of individual

talent and somewhat kindred approach, namely, Wrey Gardiner, Peter Yates, and Vernon Watkins

In *The Gates of Silence* (1944) Mr Gardiner writes a grave poetry which plays with images and ideas, keeping mainly on the discursive surface above depths of which he is well aware.

To the shattered window no dove will come  
 Over the inarticulate dim sea,  
 For in no unwilling heart his wing will home,  
 Or droop with tired eye upon a tree  
 Because our passion is for the nameless skeleton,  
 And the lost love has gone (*Elegy for an Epoch*)

He can be clean-cut and lovely, as in *Poem for Liverpool Street Station*, but in his careful search for exact expression he strays into obscurity, as he confesses in *Emblem*

Because I am indifferent to the splendour  
 Of all these words, but look towards the ending,  
 The buried petal of the individual rose

I write beside the mark, the subtle aim,  
 Losing the impenetrable ego in the dream,  
 And hear the music rumoured in a name,  
 Remembered emblem of the buried stream

A frankness and self-knowledge rare among his contemporaries Because he is so scrupulous he sees that

The pure line of the partisan is a dangerous division  
 Between the love of love and the love of death  
 (*The Party Line*)

But he is sadly aware of the age, and his long poem, *The Gates of Silence*, in which he relates his

moods to the seasonal progression of the year, is a notable achievement

Crying

O formless age, O bitter crested fire  
 Of the radiated skein of living blood  
 Give us the saint, the seer and the man  
 Who knows the unknown quality, who sees  
 The unbroken road beyond the dream of years (II)

he mourns a day where "the poet has no part," and there are few to hear him (V), he broods on the mutability of experience

The accumulation of beauty is the bees' wing of desire  
 The little fire of a passing life-time before the shadow

(VIII)

and attains through thought and pity and love a peace which is

the ancient censure of the sun  
 In the veins, light in the silent upper room (X)

so that he can feel in the end that

The ancient quiet of this autumn morning  
 Fine as the bright leaves, careless of winter's bitter ending  
 Is twisted about the heart like a scarf of gold,  
 Triumph of treasure that cannot be sold (XII)

The poem owes much to Eliot in its use of evocative images ("The statue in the garden, the lost figure among the trees," etc.), but it has its own validity despite some weak passages. It lacks the energy of the work of the true Apocalypse school, but it too is the work of "the individual man Harassed by multitudes" and questioning "Why are men separate," not knowing "What passes in the other room, the other mind."

We may contrast with the concrete manner of Mr Gardiner the less tangible imagery of Peter Yates whose *The Expanding Mirror* and *The Motionless Dancer* (1943) also proved him to be a philosophical poet in the making. Many of his poems are obscure owing to his dependence on a symbolism geometrical, colourless and itself the product of abstraction, so that we guess the sense at two removes. All would be clear if one clue, one word, were added, we feel. In *The Motionless Dancer* it seems that the statue depicted represents the creative spirit which produces both the world of nature and (in the mind of man) the work of art; the Being beyond life and death which we both yearn for and fear.

Is ever his secret caught,  
Resolved in the mind and known ,  
Desired for joy alone ?  
Imagined and motionless dance ,  
Centre of mobile storm—  
His is the ultimate form  
The flesh into Word has thought

Again, this is far from the dense polyphony of Dylan Thomas's poetry. It is nearer to the imagery and idea found in Herbert Read. Yates moves in the rarified atmosphere of ultimate aspirations, as in the lovely invocation, *Star of Eternal Possibles and Joy*,

Star of eternal possibles and joy,  
Vibrate the marble with your kiss !  
On ancient columns and dark walls  
Fall with unearthly calls,  
Bird-supple wings disturbing air !

with its longing for spiritual growth,

The missing but imagined arc  
For which the circle aches,  
The vista waiting to be seen

Coming to Vernon Watkins we are nearer to the Celtic effervescence of Apocalyptic sound and colour. The two volumes, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* (1941) and *The Lamp and the Veil* (1945), both revelled in a spate of music and image, the latter with increasing mastery. *Sea-music for my Sister Travelling* is an irregular-rhymed fantasy of oceanic themes, pouring out in wild profusion images of fish and storm, wave and sunlight, fear and beauty, with a decorative recklessness reminiscent of Francis Thompson and Roy Campbell.

Zig-zag swordfish daggering  
Rip the plumed exultation of the whale  
Whose thousand years are drowned in that blood-spring  
Falling through darkness, falling from a wing  
To the sea-troughs, ark of the covenant, lowering of the grail  
To the mad navel of the million-fated sky

Returning now,  
You have the gale for peace  
May giddying lightning play about your prow,  
A brilliant storm black bolts and hailstones throw,  
Fork-lightning pitch, a wilderness of light,  
A coil of deaths, a bodyguard of loves  
Freaking the track

*The Broken Sea*, a poem for a child born in Paris, May 1940, is less successful, perhaps because here there is more thought, but thought submerged in the sensuous images and rhetoric intended to

embody it. *Yeats in Dublin*, the third poem in the second volume, is the most promising, for it shows how much Mr Watkins has to gain in calm and limpidity by the example of the great poet he went over to see and whose conversation and personality he describes so well

“ The young poets,” he murmured,  
“ Toil too much. They lay  
Something on their table,  
And dissect and wear it away  
Till nothing but the grit is left ,  
But all song is gay

There must always be a quality  
Of nonchalance in the work  
The intellect is impotent  
Labouring in the dark,  
For a poem is always  
A piece of luck ”

Mr Watkins does not dissect with the intellect, but he lacks nonchalance, the severe ease of the years “ spent Chiselling and chiselling The stubborn element , the realisation “ That truth must cut harder Than the diamond ” His verbal dexterity and rhythmic resource lead him into danger of mere sound and fury But this is significant , for most of the poets discussed in this chapter, however different in their ultimate aims, have helped to lead poetry away from excess of thought over image, the arid waste lands of literary and sociological allusion, the will o’ the wisp of metaphysical wit, towards natural lyricism, and the singing note, and a sensuous imagery deepened in significance by intimations of the hidden life within the mind.

## CHAPTER TEN

OBSERVERS AND SERVICE-POETS (1939-45)

THOUGH the poetry of the past twenty-five years swung between the poles of intellectual and emotional privacy, yet, as we have seen, there was a growing desire for a plainer and, if possible, more popular way of writing. Even the most enigmatic poets were not riddling all the time, ever and anon they sang themselves into sense, and their maturer work was usually more accessible to the average reader than that of their extremer youth.

Some of the obscurity of modern poetry was due to a real difficulty of subject-matter, a complexity of feeling and thought; some was due to experimental technique fostered by reading the Symbolists, Valéry, Rilke, Blake, etc.—to compression, or to novel image-weaving; some was due to inexperience, lack of verbal skill, ignorance of the reader's limitations, affectation, or the exclusive appeal to a small group. Many of the real difficulties disappeared for one who knew something of the author's biography or reading; others were inseparable from the attempt to write a poetry of direct emotional impact and yet at the same time to convey in it an attitude to life including the intricate social, intellectual and moral relationships of the contemporary situation. A simple poetry depends in the end on a simple view of life, it

may be naive, or it may be a universal view in which all the elements of experience are fused in a unifying apprehension of good and evil, nature, man and God. It may be the view of W H Davies, or that of Blake, or Hardy or Shakespeare, or Vaughan. The higher simplicity is rarely achieved as yet in contemporary verse, but the last ten years have brought approximations to it in the work of some poets already considered. War and peace have shown the need and possibility of singlemindedness and a simpler way of living and thinking, and there has been a revival of interest in a plain style in poetry which has not yet produced its probable harvest.

The despised Georgians are an unconscionable time in dying. Their kinsmen Bridges, De la Mare, Blunden and Graves have won highbrow approval. The clarity of Hardy and Manley Hopkins, the ballad-ease of Yeat's last poems, the "innocent eye" and "innocent speech" of Blake and the Metaphysicals at their best—all have pushed home the realisation that it is rather ridiculous for socially minded writers to speak for the common folk in terms that the common folk cannot understand. The dramatic experiments of Eliot and Auden, the journalistic verse of the latter also pointed to a revival of colloquial poetry.

Another strand was supplied by the writers who, impatient with Audenesque ideology and Surrealist somnambulism, tried to make their poetry clear, simple and concrete by drawing their images from the outside world and by avoiding much use of

general ideas or the subconscious Mr Henry Treece (who belongs to another set) mentions two batches of writers (they are not strictly "groups") whom we may place in this category many of the *New Verse* poets, and especially Geoffrey Grigson, Kenneth Allott, and Kathleen Raine—these he accuses of playing a "parlour-game of The Object", and such others as Julian Symons, Ruthven Todd, Roy Fuller, etc., who "seemed anxious to present a flattened surface, to tone down their images, in order to tell a story, or to present an event without undue distraction" (*How I see Apocalypse*)

Space does not allow me to deal with all these writers, but it is not necessary or indeed just to consider them as two distinct groups, for they are all quite individual in their work, and only alike in the comparative simplicity of their effects. When Mr Treece wrote of the "parlour-game of The Object," he was accusing some of them of taking too literally T. S. Eliot's celebrated statement (in *The Sacred Wood*)

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative," in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, so that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. The artistic "inevitability" lies in the exact equivalence of the external to the emotion."

Now Eliot was expressing clearly the relationship between outward form and inner meaning which exists in the details of any painting or poetry. By using the words "which must terminate in sensory experience," he showed himself still under the influence of Imagist sensationalism ; but his own poetry did not limit itself to a hard bright coinage of concrete equivalence. Nor does the work of the poets Mr Treece is decrying ; yet there is an externality in their writing which is partly the result of a revolt against current sociological assumptions and didacticism, and partly the result of a wish to bring poetry into touch with the life about us without being merely descriptive.

I have already dealt with Mr Symons. His assertion "In poetry the factual is to be preferred to the abstract," when taken together with another dictum "The poet is or ought to be the perfect 'mass-observer' a mass in one" indicates one direction of this kind of writing, since it recalls the activities of the "Mass-Observation" group who began in the 'thirties to collect facts of British social behaviour and to use them as anthropological material. Mr Symons was, however, himself near to Auden in using typical illustrations of middle-class behaviour in a diagnosis of social and personal ills. He was more interested in the diagnosis than in the illustrations, and he expatiated on their meaning with commendable clarity.

In Mr Kenneth Allott we see the illustration becoming more interesting than the "lesson." His first volume of *Poems* (1938) showed reading of

Eliot, Donne, Auden, etc., and considerable fluency of word and music His love-poems were witty and charming, and he reflected wryly on the passivity of the "intellectuals"

Who have been educated out of naive responses,  
The hoodoo of love, the cinderella of class

To whom the actor's gesture, the preacher's word  
Are not enough, being at all times too conscious  
Of the shortcomings of motive, who refuse drugs  
And the tail-spin of madness

*(Aunt Sally Speaks )*

In *Men Walk Upright* he expressed hopelessness in a series of antitheses, objective against subjective

The blackbirds sing and I see no end of agony,  
The pink and white blossom

Spangles the chestnuts, the theatres pour into the streets  
The unimaginative And the earth renews  
In Europe its solar gaiety, and the earth moves on  
To no destination

All was futile and there was nothing to be done about it He saw it all so clearly, with none of Symons' conscience-struck bewilderment Similarly his comments on politicians, the plutocrats, the Universities (*The Museum*) were ironic observations rather than judicial summings-up In his second volume, *The Ventriloquist's Doll* (1943), he touched on many things with brittle lightness (*Love in the Suburbs, Love and Herbert Spencer, The Medium*) He

enjoyed watching people and talking about them with a

Diurnal haemorrhage of images  
 For mind goes round like a prayer wheel,  
 Or wishes are a cloud of butterflies  
 Fluttering off the bow of a street violinist  
 To be lost in a maze of doorways

(*Feast of St Swithin*)

If obscurity be not a proof of poetic depth, neither is a clear-flowing transparency, to each its uses

Mr Geoffrey Grigson uses the "objective correlative" in a different way in *Several Observations* (1939) and *Under the Cliff* (1943). His technique goes back to the Imagists proper, for he builds up his poems with separate lines, usually unrhymed, and each presenting a distinct item in a picture obtained by the tension between the images. It is a poetry studiously "respectful to the exploited Symbol" (*Items*) in which a sad disillusion is set almost impersonally against a background of nature in miniature. Grigson is sensitive to memories of childhood among country sights (*Nineteen-Nine*), to the passing of the country-life and the elegancies of the eighteenth-century Georgian Age, to Blake and other Romantics,

You Keats, you intricate Coleridge,  
 Sarcastic Constable, and Palmer  
 Loving and knowing

The eyes and buds of the world

(*Hampstead Heath*)

(but it is their desolation he shares). He mourns

the passing of individual and cultural graces ; as in *April at a Scene of Childhood*

Meeting again the figurative, familiar talk,  
And the odd-cut leaves and yellow-centred flower,  
Flushing the blunt owl from the ivied fork  
Marking the afternoon glitter round the enormous tower

Is not that old unconscious entity How to have  
Them allied, while the dull bombs of the State  
Rattle the loose doors in the hollow house I loved,  
Engages me, now separate

This is a good instance of his fine craftsmanship, which folds a whole world of loss into a few lines and gives an image such as "the dull bombs of the State" far more than its surface, wartime meaning He is alive to all the falsities of pretended love and justice (*The Evil Garden*), to the antitheses of vileness and beauty in *Worcester* He feels an alien in the world of nature

All objects at times enquire  
Why are you here ?

but he colours it with his own distress, and in autumn (*Under the Cliff*) "A stale and unconvinced denial of defeat" breathes from the plants outside where

Toads pause, the handsome slugs will hide  
And the caught bee dry and fade inside  
The emptied room

for despite our weak visions of love, the whole heart of man "must be blamed for the young head On the pavement in the shape of blood." (*The*

*Landscape of the Heart*) Few living poets can rival Mr Grigson in the delicacy with which he designs his vignettes of the human heart, his limitation is, that unlike Rilke (whom he translates with skill) he cannot sing "I praise"

Such a reserved talent, working inwards from the visible world with tight economy of statement, could not appeal to slapdash disciples of Auden or the Somnambulists, nor had it much in common with the bulk of poetry produced during the war except its plain diction

The plain style was more close to the plain man's commonsense in the poetry of Ruthven Todd (*Ten Poems* (1940), *The Acreage of the Heart* (1944)), who commented on the life about him with an effect of pleasant solidity *An Autobiography* (1938) gathered together memories of his own youth; *Various Places* and *Various Ends* both show his liking for rapid survey of things of interest—the latter being a summary of how some famous men met their deaths

Blake had no doubts, his old fingers curled  
    Around dear Kate's frail and transparent hand,  
Death merely meant a changing of his world,  
    A widening of experience, for him it marked no end

There is no great force here, nor in the whole catalogue, some of Mr Todd's short portraits of artists and their work are more original, e.g. *Paul Klee, Swift, Samuel Palmer at Highgate* Though his reflections on religion and society are rather jejune (e.g. *Elegy for Christmas, 1943*), he expresses

the feelings of the ordinary man very well in *During an Air Raid*

O this earth, I say to the wrecked world, is ample for all  
 As rich as a ripe rowan with bunches of berries ,  
 Yet night is broken with light, with bursting bombs,  
 And houses that once were happy are tumbled tombs

He writes best on his own background, the tradition in which he was reared, as in *Personal History for my Son*, which meditates on the mysteries of inheritance

The cantilever of my bones acknowledges the architect  
 My father, to whom always the world was a mystery  
 Concealed in the humped base of a bottle, one solid fact  
 To set against the curled pages and the tears of history  
 I am a Border keep, a croft and a solicitor's office,  
 A country rectory, a farm and a drawing board

Mr Todd, too, has the love of "solid fact" which keeps him close to earth, prevents his poetry from soaring, but gives his work some of the substantial verity we find in many of the war-poets in the Services.

It is no longer possible to make any significant distinction between war-poetry and peace-poetry. In a sense most of the social verse written in the 'thirties was already war poetry, since writers of Left, Right and Centre were already full of the impending struggle and like "ancestral voices prophesying war", for many of them actual hostilities began in Abyssinia or Spain. With the coming of battle to England, however, a change of attitude came over many young authors besides C Day Lewis and Dylan Thomas. Some who had somewhat idly

played with technique now found a theme to tax its resources Introspection grew less self-engrossed , broad human issues were less theoretical , death was not so attractive at close quarters as it had been in the pages of Rilke—on the other hand, Rilke might be used to support a fearful spirit Men who had mixed little with others found real community at last as the man in the Ivory Tower became the man in the Shelter A gradual simplification of their poetry resulted, and this occurred irrespective of a man's civilian or military status After all, many civilians were in close touch with the " horrors " of war more often, and for longer periods, than many soldiers

It is, however, interesting to glance through the work of some authors who had written little or nothing before 1939 and whose work was therefore mainly written under service-conditions at home or abroad As might be expected, moods similar to those of 1914-18 are found—patriotic sentiment (though less boldly expressed), pictures of horror and fear, rebellion against regimentation, anger against enemies' cruelty, pity for self and for all victims of the struggle The formal simplicity of Rupert Brooke's joyous greeting to death and the dead is entirely absent, however, and the love of country lacks the one-sided certainty of Kipling's and Elgar's generation. On the whole, service-verse was occasional and close to the moment of casual inspiration , much was impressionistic, but without the rawness of Robert Nicholl's *Attack*, perhaps because a war of waiting gave writers time to think

and prune Certainly, more poetry was written than during the 1914-18 campaign, and over more of the globe Young talents were invigorated by new environments, by travel and many sorts of adventure Finally, there was less spiritual exhaustion in the forces After the first year of disillusion and catastrophe all were stimulated by the sense of imminent peril to things held dear There was no cleavage between civilians and servicemen , there was bombing at home, and often worse conditions than in uniform , there was a common bond of danger shared and everything to gain and lose The war, indeed, saw a time of spiritual recuperation for the British people, which started with the Battle of Britain and rose to its climax soon after D Day. The poets shared this return to health If they felt little sentimentality, they wrote little satire , on the other hand, there were few rosy visions of the immediate future, for the young people, well informed about the problems which would face the world in peace, were mistrustful of heroics and promises , and the spread of internationalism made the brotherly love of Wilfred Owen triumph over enmity in many poems inspired by his example A surprising number of pieces show their authors rising above the struggle and viewing themselves and it with mature detachment The poetry of this war though born of the moment, was not suffocated by it

Some poets, as in 1914, could turn neat verses and sing birdlike above catastrophe So John Pudney, author of *Dispersal Point* (1941), *Beyond this*

*Disregard* (1943), *South of Forty* (1943), *Almanac of Hope* (1944), etc., made a modest but just claim when he replied, to a critic who dismissed his first volume as "journalism in verse"

"We are so physically and morally engulfed by the times in which we live that poetic journalism — song-writing — is a very proper method of expression."

He expressed the gaiety of the airman which cloaked the precariousness of their existence

wrote epitaphs on the dead (*One Country Bred, Ballad Under the Atlas*), paid tribute to allies, and expressed the hard-won resolution looking beyond destruction to a new life.

Let the cold fire break out in happy men,  
Their blade the reasoning edge, their bomb the fury,  
Outblast of understanding, force sudden,  
Deliberate as surgery *(The New Story)*

This stanza illustrates the looseness of thought and imagery which accompanied his attempt to use the Auden manner in a popular way

More thoughtful and equally modest Alan Rook wrote, in *Soldiers this Solitude* (1942) and *These are my Comrades* (1943), "a series of snapshots—as it were the jottings in an artist's notebook from which the great picture will one day be painted" Using

the Imagist manner he can sketch *Village at War*

Along the banks of the pavement  
are broken walls,  
a painted motto  
replaces the scorched vine

or in *Bombed City* recall Herbert Read's method

Woman lies with  
city to her breast  
crushed by the towers  
and pain of mortar

He is at home in a symbolism that adumbrates a mood rather than describes a scene

Across the meadows of sorrow  
and the ocean of despair  
the hyacinths of love  
are pale and fair,

and my brothers rise to greet me  
with faces toward the sun ,  
a hundred thousand branches  
reveal the tree as one

*(Lullabye )*

His third volume, *We who are fortunate* (1945), showed that Mr Rook wrote better in this Japanese-like manner than in the longer pieces where more developed thought brought a rhetorical movement and, as in *Green Mountain*, memories of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Bearing in mind that, as he states,

over all I've thought and written  
has rested the leaf-like tracery of hurry,  
casting its pattern across my eyes, spelling  
its message Don't linger, for there may be no to-morrow  
*(Light rests in our eyes )*

one can admire his attempt to impose fanciful

design upon the impressionism of Hulme and Pound

Roy Fuller's *The Middle of a War* (1942) and *A Lost Season* (1944) show a different aspiration, for, beginning in the cult of Auden (cf. *Poems*, 1939), he became the Sassoon of this War, but without the satiric bitterness that gave pungency to Sassoon's early verses. As he feared (*January*, 1940) he had not the "fertile lack of balance" found in many greater poets, he was a plain observer who wrote best with his eye on the object, and whose vision faltered when he passed into abstractions of a customary kind

It is goodbye

To the social life which permitted melancholy  
And madness in the isolation of its writers,  
In a struggle inconclusive as the Hundred  
Years' War

(Soliloquy in an Air Raid)

He could write an amusing *ABC of a Naval Trainee*, a moving *Epitaph on a Bombing Victim*, and some tender love-poems (*The End of a Leave*, *Goodbye for a Long Time*) With a keener eye for broad external effects than Rook, he caught the atmosphere of a place and moment in *Saturday Night in a Sailors' Home* His recording power was increased in *A Lost Season* when he viewed Africa with illusionless humanitarianism

What gods did you expect to find here, with  
What healing powers? What subtle ways of life?  
No, there is nothing but the forms and colours,  
And the emotion brought from a world already  
Dying of what starts to infect the hills

(The Green Hills of Africa)

Without rhetoric or metaphysics he describes soberly and clearly the natives—their strange life and the coming together of their old culture and our new battered one (*The White Conscript and the Black Conscript*, *Teba*, *The Tribes*) He also reflects on the nature of things, and, realising that “Life at last I know is terrible,” sees that it is useless to blame others or to bemoan his own fate

What's done  
To me is done to many I can see  
No ghosts, but only the fearful actual  
Lives of my comrades If the empty whitish  
Horror is ever to be flushed and real,  
It must be for them and changed by them all  
*(What is terrible)*

He accepts the burden of his knowledge and of

and comes in the *Epilogue* to hope (if not to be sure) (cf. *A Wry Smile*) that

There is a meaning though was purposed none

This dogged acceptance of the implications of the life he records, and this plain style which embodies it faithfully and well, make Mr Fuller's poetry a solid, substantial work of value.

Alun Lewis comes between these two poets in his union of cool observation with brief passionate cry. More penetrating in imagery than Fuller, more truly lyrical than Rook, he showed a great promise.

which had not reached full fruition when he died in Burma. Like many others thrust into the forces, he felt (as Mr Robert Graves tells us in the foreword to *Ha! Ha! among the Trumpets*, 1945) "the difficulty of reconciling his life as a poet with his life as a soldier, and the difficulty too of knowing where he stood critically and philosophically in a world that was changing its coat so fast." The poems of *Raiders' Dawn* (1942) were, the poet declared, to be regarded only as "a personal statement." Often unpolished, they revealed a seeing eye and a thinking heart, and they showed how much Lewis owed to Edward Thomas—on whom he wrote a good poem.

The beauty of nature assuaged his frustration.

Yet still

I who am agonised by thought  
 And war and love  
 Grow calm again  
 With watching  
 The flash and play of finches  
 Who are as beautiful  
 And as indifferent to me  
 As England is, this Spring morning  
 (*The Soldier*, II.)

Though his human love seemed impermanent compared with the "grey assured" Tudor mansion, he gloried in it,

Perfect and instant  
 As the soft silk flash of the swifts

He reflected on the characters of his fellow-soldiers (*To a Comrade in Arms* and *Finale*), in *After Dunkirk*

he pondered on the unwilling heroes who had come, through "Mere rigid brute routine" to "A growing self-detachment," then to a stoical quiet as they waited on the beach, and finally to new resolution

When the worn and beautiful faces of the half-forgotten  
Came softly round them with the holy power  
To raise the wounded and the dying succour,  
Making complete all that was misbegotten  
Or clumsily abused or left neglected

*Threnody for a Starry Night* is a collection of thoughts and memories—in which the boy's wretched fumbling after love, the song of the Polish refugees, the stars ("Glow-worms in the frozen hair Of dead soldiers"), reminiscences of history and poetry, are all caught in the maze of

The white brain crossing  
The frontiers of darkness  
To darkness and always  
Darkness pursuing,

as it thinks of the hollow craters "where sweet eyes were," the sheltering civilians "in the crowded deadly places," and recalls that

always in Shakespearean tragedy  
The foils are poisoned that the good may die

Some of the finest lines in recent poetry occur in this work, which just lacks the explicit links which would make it a unified whole

The senseless breaking in of war upon peace is a favourite theme (e.g. *Christmas Holiday*). Many of his best poems depict the frustration of lovers, the

pangs of separation, longings physical and spiritual, the unsatisfactory meetings (*War Wedding*), the ironies of love new and old (*The Dancer, The Swan's Way*) Here Lewis seems to have inherited something of Yeats's blend of steel and fire

His second volume, *Ha! Ha! among the Trumpets* (1945) expanded his scope and technique Vivid impressions of Wales and England are followed by vignettes of embarkation, the troopship, and of India and Burma, where the pains of his situation do not hide his delight in the seething, colourful, corrupted life of the tropics Compare Roy Fuller's poetry of commonsense with Lewis's passionate imagination In a few lines he gives us the "girls tawny as gazelles, Beating their saris clean in pools and singing" (*The Journey*), the trappings and the "wasted sleepy corpse" of *Village Funeral*, the glare and pangs of *Indian Day* And always there is the longing for home and wife, the haunting paradox of beauty and suffering He envies Rilke "the silence you adjured," and has nothing to bulwark him against the sea of depression

But the simplicity that she and I  
Discovered in a way you'd understand  
Once and for ever, Rilke, but in Oh a distant land  
(*To Rilke*)

His letters provide a rich record of his observation and his poetic conflicts in the East, and show how he made several versions of a poem "Each version I often worked to simplify and abbreviate I've cut out nearly every rich adjective and high metaphor and in a casual sort of way reduced them to their

minima" (*Welsh Review*, June 1945) He tried to make the second volume "steadier, more general, more in line with fact and universal experience" than *Raiders' Dawn*, which he called "young and passionate" Young and passionate he remained however, and to this (with his skilful craftsmanship and verbal delicacy) must be ascribed his success

The best of the service-poets, Sidney Keyes, unlike these others, wrote little directly upon the war and was little concerned with day-to-day military events, although he grew up in the struggle and was deeply moved by it (He was only seventeen in 1939 and not quite twenty when he was killed in Tunisia, having published two volumes, *The Iron Laurel* (1942) and *The Cruel Solstice* (1944).

As a poet his interests were little in the external world, despite his wish that he had been born in the Romantic period, when

"I might have been a good pastoral poet, instead of an uncomfortable metaphysical without roots The trouble is that a thing of beauty is not a joy for ever to me , nor am I content to imagine beauty is truth, etc All I know is that everything in a vague sort of way means something else, and I want desperately to find out what" (quoted by M. Meyer in his illuminating Memoir of S K in the *Collected Poems* (1945))

He was attracted to Wordsworth and Clare (*of* his poems on them), to Hardy and Edward Thomas by their strong personal vision which looked *through* natural objects, and to Blake, Yeats, Donne,

Holderlin and Rilke by their questioning attitudes  
He believed the poet's function was

"to give to his audience some inkling of the continual fusion of the finite and infinite . . . to show the relationship between the eternal and its physical counterpart" (*ibid* p xvii)

This has something in common with the ideals of the "New Apocalypse," but Keyes did not like "the present trend to a new over-wrought Romanticism," and followed Yeats and Rilke in exploring ways of symbolism with a classical restraint and mastery amazing in one so young. His *Lament for Dead Symbolists*, whose "balconies are empty though the scent Of tender indecision wanders there" suggests that he was no uncritical disciple of the nineteenth-century experimentors.

From the first he was occupied with death and pain. An early fragment "Shall the Dead Return?" shows the *revenants'* yearning for sensuous life

In spring they all come back ,  
I saw old Housman watching by the weir  
For sweethearts he never knew and never will know,

while the poet rejoices in his own power to watch "while iridescent duck-wings carve In wild geometry the evening sky" Elsewhere afraid of mutability he cries "Take now, not soon," and in *William Yeats in Limbo* he imagines the dead poet still yearning for youth and flesh, still defeated and bitter. On the other hand he has a tender *Elegy for*

*Mrs Virginia Woolf*, marred only by one or two affectations

Envyng the unitary vision of the bird in *The Buzzard*, he came to feel that the task of the poet was

in bitterness

Of heart to strike the strings, and muster  
The shards of pain to harmony, not sharp  
With anger to insult the merry guest

*(The Bards)*

This harmonising of experience was not to be obtained through easy political hopes, and in *Advice for a Journey* he rejected the optimism of the pre-war Left-Wingers

You'll find, maybe, the dream under the hill —  
But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain

In the monologue *Gilles de Retz* he studied one who sought the secret in sadism, in Pope (*Sour Land*) as in Yeats he traced the failure of pride, a truer way would be through sympathy with suffering

Yet groping painfully, love's roots may save  
The dumb soul of a stone, or justify  
The holed heart in a crossroad grave

*(Being not proud)*

In *Cervières* he reflected on the defeat of France ("Planting this lump of pain, perhaps a flower Might burst from it"), in *Europe's Prisoners*, on men immured and in exile, he offered *A Hope for those separated by War*, and he regarded himself as a war poet. His *Timoshenko* was a magnificent tribute. All his work was strongly influenced by his appreciation of the contemporary situation, but, student of history and legend, he looked on

the present as just one point on the circle of human anguish. He made a few impressionist sketches of things seen (*The Migrant, Pheasant*), but joining the army in 1942 made little difference to his poetry. Always it was the world within that mattered, and he found, like Yeats, solace and pattern in myth and legend (cf *The Glass Tower in Galway, Troll Kings, Actaeon's Lament, The Grail*) *Ulster Soldier* and *Two Offices of a Sentry* further prove the inward bent of his mind.

His preoccupation with the poetic image grew. He envied Yeats, "With figured symbols weaving Truth so easily", and he longed for the assurance that nature revolved through a zodiac of symbols, that the universe was based on a system of correspondences. In some moods, however,

nothing seems related, incident or vision,  
To any but a voluntary thought

so he urged himself to accept the apparent irrelevance of events (*The Anti-Symbolist*). In vain, for was not poetry simply an art of image-making, and wisdom its fruit?

None may turn  
Winter's hard sentence, but the silly man,  
The workless plowman or the unhoused poet

he wrote (*Against Divination*) following Yeats, but the "workless plowman" (Piers Plowman?) rather than the Fool became his symbol for the seer. Often, as in *The Cruel Solstice* and *Night Estuary*, inner and outer did not fuse into the words he sought, and this failure itself became the poem.

But more and more he tried to write in a series of images that spoke for themselves (e.g. *War Poet*, *A Hope for those Separated by War*, *Images of Distress*, *Seascape* and the *Figure of a Bird and a Ring*)

He made several attempts at long symbolical poems which show both his debt to Eliot, Yeats and Rilke, and the difficulty he had in binding together the separate sections in which he conceived them (e.g. *All Souls* and *Against a Second Coming*). He regarded the latter indeed "rather as a series of symbolic devices than as a sequence of thought or of narrative" *Four Postures of Death* brought together four distinct pieces, in one of which (*Death and the Lovers*) Death was originally a Husband *The Foreign Gate* and *The Wilderness* were conceived as wholes In the former, Keyes, just before he was called up, wrote a vision of Death and its power Imagining himself at the foreign gate of death, he calls on the dead to speak for the comfort of those about to die , he makes himself a bridge, a medium through whom they may communicate and " Cry through the trumpet of my fear and rage " (II). They speak through him and to each other in snatches of poignant complaint, " the forgotten Lovers defrauded by despite and war " (II)

" I was cold  
But found the well a colder couch "  
    " And I

" Was a horse-riding roarer who came down  
Among the furze

" It is not right  
To grin so wide, my dearest, as the shroud grips fame  
Or to be limned in grave-clothes "

But they call in vain "There is no summer in that land-locked city" In the fourth section speak the soldiers, who died in all ages, at Kunersdorf and Naseby, Tannenberg and Dunkirk, in Spain and the execution-yard, their fame no longer matters, nor the panoply of war and state

"these never pardon  
The pain and sorrow It is the dying pardons,  
For something different from man or emblem "

Then the poet imagines himself, like Rilke ("A pale unlearned poet"), crying out in

"that high-pillared house  
Where the great sit, in stone unmoved, yet knowing  
The world's minute catastrophes" (V)

for a solution of life's riddle He learns that greatness lies in acceptance

Wrestling with angels, they found out in time  
Only the coward will resist that fall,  
And so, embracing bravely the white limbs  
Engulfed in the long shining hair, they learnt  
Humility and triumph

The "shadow-dance" fades, the poet returns to normal life, having discovered that

. help or hope is none till the circle be broken  
Of wishing death and living time's compulsion,  
Of wishing love and living love's destruction  
Till then the soul is caged in brain and bone  
And the observant man must walk alone (VI)

It is impossible to do justice here to this remarkable piece of art in which the mediæval Complaint, the elegy, the visionary power of Wilfred Owen, the

fragmentary technique of T S Eliot, are fused with astonishing mastery of imagery and paragraphing Keyes's later poem *The Wilderness*, much more under Eliot's influence, is less effective. But *The Foreign Gate* is the one great poem directly produced by the war. It was written by a boy not yet twenty, who in three years of poetry achieved a union of image with thought and feeling, of clarity with richness of suggestion, of restraint with tragic vision, that had scarcely been reached by three decades of older men.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### CONCLUSIONS

LOOKING back over fifty years of poetry we have seen many changes, cross-currents, groups, and individual experiments of a striking kind. Every age is an age of transition, ours is remarkable for the variety, speed and direction of its transformations. Generally speaking, there have been in the first half of the twentieth century three main movements which overlap and persist, but arose in this order a continuation of the romantic naturalism of the nineteenth century in a mild lyrical form (1900-1914), an anti-romantic movement of wit, satire and introspection (1914-1934), a movement of simplicity, dream and vision leading to a new Romanticism (1934- ). Among the many factors that have brought these changes about, perhaps the most important in their diverse interplay were a growing recognition of the claims of contemporary life upon the artist, a perpetual search for standards of value both in life and art; and experiment in poetic form and especially in imagery.

The decline of romantic idealism in the nineteenth century and the rise of "realism" shown in the novels of Zola, Gissing, Bennett and Joyce, produced a poetry of low intensity, familiar in theme and imagery, mildly reflective, subdued in its

lyricism, using nature as a relief from the urban, yet finding some pleasure in that too Pursuit of actuality, accurate representation of sensations, developed an impressionist technique capable of many different applications On the whole this poetry before the 1914-18 war was optimistic, sentimental and inspired by the passing moment

But with the disintegration of age-old assumptions about the nature of man and the universe, and with the collapse of optimism in war and unrest, there rose a fierce intellectualism, a literary revolt against the cult of progress, cosmic emotion, and subjectivity, accompanied by a search for impersonal concreteness and terseness of expression The awakening of social conscience led to a revival of satire and propagandist verse "Contemporaneity" involved the decline of rhetoric, of formal writing, and the substitution of more colloquial idioms Parallel with this went a loosening of metrical form, experiments in free verse, accentual rhythms, alliteration and assonance, and an eclectic dabbling in measures from Old- and Middle-English and Elizabethan poetry , modern popular song and dance influenced rhythm and diction The revulsion from romantic enthusiasm caused a displacement of sentiment by wit and understatement An attempted reunion of passion with thought popularised a new "Metaphysical" movement contradicting the poetry of impersonality with a soul-searching inwardness. Complexity of feeling, the many-sided intricacy of contemporary social and intellectual problems, and a desire for the utmost intensity of expression led

to the exploration of new devices of association, of symbolism, of ways of suggesting thought through the juxtaposition of images Study of Japanese and Chinese poetry, of the French Symbolists, of Valéry and Rilke was influential here Many poets, filled with a sense of isolation or superiority, packed their poems with recondite allusions or with terms taken from the new sciences, technology and philosophy Seeking a new technique for the longer poem, many failed to unify their imagery and themes or used a method of fragmentation to suggest the break-up of society and traditional values

Tough-souled poets who were not content to adopt a solipsist attitude or to regard the universe as meaningless found diverse way of unifying theirs experience D H Lawrence was unique in rejecting the intelligence and finding a god in the life-giving impulses of heart and belly Most of his contemporaries sought an authority which governed all aspects of the self The Absolute might be æsthetic, as in Pound , or the Christian deity speaking through the Church and the mind of the mystic, as in Eliot , or a pantheistic force in nature and man, as in Read , or a principle of Death in Life, as in the followers of Rilke , or it might be an ideal of freedom and equality, as in the Left-Wingers with their vision of a Socialist paradise Any one of these faiths brought design into life and art, implied its own special themes, terminology and imagery Successful " Metaphysical " or philosophical poetry depends on the imaginative (even more than the intellectual) grasp of its particular

cosmic assumptions Our age is unique in the number of poets seeking to write about the ultimate things of their faith—or should I say, in the number of poets seeking an ultimate faith to write about? Much of the abstractness, the obscurity, the artistic uncertainty of the more thoughtful poetry between the wars was due to the absence either of real beliefs or of imaginative assimilation of belief

We can see Ezra Pound already losing his grasp of the æsthetic Absolute in *Mauberley*, which is a poem on that very theme, once it was lost he could not make a poem of his *Cantos* Herbert Read's work has gained in warmth and vitality as his ethos has become more personal and fused with his whole mind Revolutionary Communism and a cult of science and machinery formed the political opinions of the Left-Wing poets, but their imaginative apprehension of life was a Liberal idealism, hence their early poetry was best where these touched each other, and their work has deepened and simplified only as the years have stripped off their illusions and freed them to explore the implications of their real beliefs T S Eliot has moved from chaos (in *Gerontion*) to a high point on the mystic way (in *The Four Quartets*), and while the imaginative spring of his life may be summed up in Browning's words, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp Or what's a heav'n for?" he made good poetry even from his gropings and fumblings But as his reach has lengthened, his grasp has broadened, and the superiority of *The Four Quartets* over *Ash Wednesday* is due in part at

least to his widening apprehension and firmer grip on elements of his experience which at one time were incoherent because the design was not yet seen

The cerebral trends which produced these and other remarkable poems of introspection or philosophy reached their climax in the 'thirties. Their very success caused a reaction which took several directions, including a return to plain external fact and a transcribing of experience without introspection, a Surrealist escape from external fact and introspection through somnambulist writing, and the "New Apocalyptic" aspiration to a new Romanticism combining respect for external fact with the life of dream. Such poets took much of their imagery from the natural world without ignoring the scientific material which had recently proved its emotional value. Some continued the search for images reflecting the racial as well as the individual subconscious. Symbols from mythology and folklore mingled with images of a strong sexual or other archetypal nature, and the play of wit gave place again to more sensuous figures.

The war of 1939-45 simplified both life and art. It brought into poetry a concentrated and substantial experience of life and peril of death which on the whole was accompanied by self-knowledge and understanding of others. Writers old and young realised as never before the terrible beauty of existence, the mingling of good and evil in all men, the necessity for each one to come to terms with death and suffering. Naturally their work was preoccupied with human pain, but their

attitudes were on the whole less pessimistic than these of the 'twenties, less cocksure than those of the 'thirties. The preponderant tone is perhaps a pagan stoicism tempered with a resolved hope for freedom and fraternity; it is based on a notion that through a recognition of human limitations and potentialities one may achieve a balanced purposiveness which will in some way be in accord with the balance of good in the universe. The notion is more fruitful ethically than metaphysically, but it is in line with what Mr Read has called "the wandering, wavering grace of humble men," and it has already inspired some good poetry.

From the Imagists onwards for about twenty years the major poetic ideal was to attain the "terrible crystal"—by a craftsmanship hard and clear-cut—or the "Chinese jar" of Mr Eliot's *Burnt Norton*. At its best a cold wiry precision of outline was achieved, but words, unlike jars and crystals, will not stay still, nor will the thoughts they utter, and the attempt to petrify feeling and language failed. So did the other aim, to make poetry "approach the condition of music" by reducing words to sounds and associations. One is reminded of Valéry's Pythian priestess who yearned for the static quiet of her life before she was inspired.

Forme préférée,  
Fraîcheur par qui ne fut jamais  
Aphrodite désaltérée,  
Intacte nuit, tendres sommets,  
Et vos partages indicibles  
D'une argile en îles sensibles,  
Douce matière de mon sort."      (*La Pythie*)

Like her, the modern poets had to suffer the invasion of organic life, a surging trouble of change, a new vision and direction. The two natures could unite only after many failures and agonies, and success must in any case be rare. But much of the poetry discussed in this book has shown the pangs of re-birth, and some at least has perceived the fulfilled Pythian's vision.

Saint LANGAGE,  
Discours prophétique et pare,  
Belles chaînes en qui s'engage  
Le dieu dans la chair égaré,  
Illumination, largesse !

Poetry is not sick, though it has growing-pains. The fifty years which have produced Yeats and Eliot, Blunden, De la Mare, and Bridges, Graves, Lawrence, Read, Edith Sitwell, Owen and Sidney Keyes, Pound, Auden, Dylan Thomas, and a score of others, are worthy to be set beside any other half-century in English literature since the Civil War, though we still wait for a Milton, a Pope, a Wordsworth, or a Browning.



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